

Don't Lose Your Heart (Kill la Kill / Kingdom Hearts)

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So, this is something I started writing after finishing Chapter 64 of To My Death I Fight...

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Chapter 1.1

*So, this is something I started writing after finishing Chapter 64 of **To My Death I Fight**. Which, I suppose, has reached a point where I can step back and appreciate all I've accomplished. And while I'm never going to say it's done. For the time being, I want to try something new. Something creative. Something that I can start fresh using everything I learned, such as showing versus telling and other writing techniques. And yes, I've attempted a Kingdom Hearts story in the past. If you check my author's page on Fanfiction, it's called **Key Through The Soul**. But I like to think this will be different. For starters, I intend for this to be a bit more relaxing with a plot that more closely follows the Kingdom Hearts lore (my earlier work had... mistakes and plot holes from the very beginning).*

*As for the background, **Don't Lose Your Heart** begins several weeks after Honnouji Academy's First Graduation Ceremony. In other words, the OVA Episode. So Honnouji Academy was destroyed during Hououmaru's assault. The Scissor Blades are at the bottom of Tokyo Bay. Senketsu remains inside Ryuko's Heart. And Ryuko and Mako are attending Rinne High School. She finally has a normal life.*

Oh well, I suppose we'll see what happens, right? It's not like Ichigo and Ryuko are about to fight the Original Life Fiber and Ragyo Kiryuin over several chapters. So enjoy!

[img: <https://i.imgur.com/4VrBmRr.png>]

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 1 - Ride on Shooting Star

She was falling.

Everything felt strange.

Almost like a dream.

And then Ryuko Matoi found herself standing in the middle of nowhere.

"What the..."

It took a moment to reorient herself. But the shock didn't wear off that quickly. What the hell was going? Where was she? In fact, where was anyone? Looking back and forth, searching for clues how she ended up in this weird place, Ryuko didn't care that she was wearing her school uniform instead of pajamas. With a scowl, she pulled on the red ribbon loosely knitted around her neck. It felt normal. But dreams weren't meant to feel this *real*. Which meant this wasn't a dream. That some guy teleported her out of bed. Not to mention somehow getting her dressed. Scoffing at the idea of some prevent looming over her unconscious body, Ryuko stepped forward, determined to find the exit or the bastard, only to grimace as the ground erupted into light.

"Alright, maybe this *is* a dream."

This had to be a dream. Because, at this point, nothing else made. Instead of solid ground, she was standing on something resembling stained glasses. The kind of fancy glass she read about in history books. But that wasn't important. And neither were the colors blending together. What was important, and confusing, was the eerily accurate, yet highly stylized, picture of Honnouji Academy stretching across the platform from end to end. It was perfect, right down to the entrance. And surrounding her old high school, circling the platform was Satsuki's Elite Four and several of the club captains she'd beaten into bloody pulps.

It was amazing.

And incredibly disturbing.

"Wait. Did I eat too much last night?"

Maybe she was enjoying Mako's mom's cooking a little too much. After all, now that Mako's dad had a job that didn't involve stealing blood or other illegal activities, they could have normal food. With normal ingredients. And no chance of food poisoning. Folding her arms, Ryuko huffed in frustration. That had to be the reason she was having this weird and screwy dream.

"Things aren't as they appear."

Her sneakers squeaked against the glass at the voice. She never heard the guy. One moment she was alone, and the next he was standing behind her. Right in the middle of the platform as if he'd been standing there all along. And it didn't take a genius to realize he looked suspicious as hell. Wearing a full-length black cloak and hood? His face covered in shadows and speaking oddly? She would need to be an idiot *not* to think this guy wasn't up to something.

"Who the hell are you?"

"The veil over your World has frayed. The boundaries are pulling apart at the seams," the figure raised a hand, shrugging nonchalantly despite her frustration, **"It won't be long until the Darkness swallows everything."**

"At the seams..."

Ryuko glowered at the strange phrase. Only one person... maybe two... would phrase something in a way that involved clothing. But Ragyo Kiryuin was dead. And Nui Harime vanished when she was absorbed by the Original Life Fiber. Which only left one option, "Alright! Spill it! Are you working for my mom? Because I stopped her! And I'll stop you too!"

"Who am I?"

With an almost casual rejection, the hooded man brushed aside the question, **"Is that truly the right question?"**

Even if this was a dream and this guy was nothing more than a figment of her imagination, Ryuko refused to take this enigmatic crap! She rushed towards the cloaked figure, determined to get answers. Or wake up. Whichever came first. But right before her fingers brushed the front of his cloak, everything flickered. A moment later, she found herself stumbling forward where she started, arms flailing as she teetered on the edge of the platform. What just happened? Growling, she pivoted, glaring at the bastard. Alright, so she couldn't get close. Or he teleported her at the last second to look tough.

She'd dealt with worse.

"That's a fancy trick. But I'll play your stupid game," mimicking the guy's nonchalant pose, she spat to the side, "What is the right question?"

"That is your decision to make," the hooded figure seemed amused by her frustration, **"Some questions ease the burden upon the Heart. Others weigh it down with impossible guilt. And others still invoke feelings of emptiness. The right question can lead to the wrong answer if one is not careful."**

"What's with the freaking riddle?"

Her fingers twitched, whether from anger or frustration she couldn't tell, "Are you going to start making sense or not!?"

"You wish to know the truth?"

It happened for an instant, but Ryuko felt something change in the distance. A sense of wrongness on the edge of her mind. Glancing around only to see nothing out of the ordinary, her brow furrowed when the cloaked man answered his own question, **"The truth comes with an immeasurable price. The truth shatters the strongest of minds. It can break the most resilient Hearts. Many beings have sought the unforgiving truth. Some, without really knowing why."**

The man stepped backwards, shadowed eyes never leaving her own, **"Although the proper path has been closed for some time, this is the only way forward."**

"Where the hell do you think you're going!?"

She raced towards the bastard, who continued talking like nothing was happening, **"You might not be prepared. But that's fine. After all, every door has a key..."**

By the time she reached the guy, her fingers almost brushing against the back of his cloak, he vanished. As if he'd never been there to begin with. Sneakers squeaking, Ryuko abruptly pivoted, glancing around the platform. What the hell was going on? The guy couldn't have just disappeared into thin air! Letting out an annoyed huff, tongue licking the inside of her mouth, she just about gave up on getting answers from the enigmatic bastard before an incredibly bright flash of white light forced her eyes shut.

"Shit!"

Even with her eyes closed, Ryuko listened for footsteps in case the coward tried something funny. But when nothing happened, and the intense light faded away, she slowly opened her eyes, careful not to lower her guard, and cursed. The cloaked figure was gone. Leaving her stranded without a goddamn clue. Or answering a single question. Pissed that the bastard ran away, *frustrated* that she was trapped in something that belonged in a dream, she stepped forward only to stop when her sneaker covered part of a *very* familiar face.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me..."

Honnouji Academy was gone. And in its place, with an expression of serenity she'd never personally seen, was Satsuki. But that wasn't the worst part. Or why her fingers clenched into fists. Surrounding her older sister, looking a lot less evil and batcrap insane, were Nui Harime and Ragyo Kiryuin, both of whom were fraying apart into Life Fibers from the neck down.

"The path ahead is perilous... difficult for the unprepared... it wouldn't be wrong to turn back..."

Her eyebrow twitched at the voice. This one was different. For starters, she couldn't see the guy. So, he was either invisible or somewhere else. And second, for some reason, this voice was different. Shaking her head, she marched over Satsuki and Nui Harime, looking for any sign of the exit. But her search was interrupted when the voice returned, both whispering in her ear and echoing around the inside of her mind.

"... but it appears you've already decided on the path you wish to take."

A shimmering crimson light surrounded her hand, almost impossible to catch at first glance. But Ryuko saw something. Something that looked like Life Fibers curling around her fingers before the Scissor Blade materialized. And, for just a moment, she was stricken speechless by the weapon. How was she holding it? The last time she saw the Scissor Blades, they were sinking into the sea after slicing apart Honnouji Academy! But astonishment turned to anger. She gave the Scissor Blade an experimental swing, and then another, and realized the blade was exactly how she remembered. Right down to the small nick near the top.

"I don't give a crap about anything you're saying."

The Scissor Blade rested against the palm of her hand as she glared into the surrounding darkness, "All I want to know is where you found this sword!"

"Power slumbers within your Heart. And if you give it form, it will grant you strength. However, you remain troubled."

She'd expected something from the bastard. Amusement. Or maybe arrogance. But the complete lack of emotion threw her off, **"Yet you're determined to step into the future without regrets. But**

remember. Do not lose sight of your goals. For those wielding power shine brightest in the Darkness..."

Ryuko moved the moment she heard something *skitter* on the glass.

Her sneakers squeaked as she rolled backwards, leaping onto her feet with the Scissor Blade clenched in her fingers. If the bastard believed he was smart enough to sneak up on her, he would be surprised to find the Scissor Blade shoved directly up his ass! But anger cooled into confusion. And then bewilderment. Blinking owlishly, Ryuko stared at the strange creature twitching in front of her, its stubby claws poking at the air. This was it? This was the big monster the voice thought was dangerous? Apart from the unnerving yellow eyes and crooked antenna, and visibly lack of mouth, the damn thing looked pathetic!

And then another two creatures pulled out of the creature's shadow. Followed by three more. Ryuko watched them carefully, scowling when all six of the bastards stopped moving and turned in her direction.

"As if!"

Flexing her knees, she launched herself forward. In a flash of crimson light, and before the creatures knew what hit them, she cut through half of the gremlins, their shadow-like bodies dissolving into darkness. With another sharp pivot, subsequently dodging the deceptively short claws of the original creature, Ryuko flipped the Scissor Blade into a reverse grip, slicing through the remaining monsters in a single pirouetting slice.

"Heh! Piece of -"

She blinked and found herself standing on another platform.

"Oh, come on!"

One look at the stained glass underneath her feet and every ounce of patience evaporated. Now she knew the bastard was screwing with her. Because the picture of Satsuki, Ragyo and Nui Harime weren't there anymore. Instead, she was forced to look at Senketsu, every stitch and threading identical to how she remembered him. And not just the Kamui, but every one of their transformations. Even Kisaragi. The Scissor Blade quivering in her fingers. Enough was enough! If this guy was going to start talking about Senketsu, she didn't care what she needed to do. She'd make him pay!

"Light cannot exist without Darkness."

To her surprise, the bastard didn't seem interested in talking about Senketsu. Blinking, Ryuko realized the guy, both of them, hadn't once mentioned anything related to her life. Only a few vague riddles.

"If you're gonna get philosophical on me, then stop talking and get to the point!"

She knew from experience something big was about to happen. She could feel it in the air. A strange, nauseating sensation that rattled her nerves. Maybe the voice would summon more of those creatures. An entire army for her to fight. Or maybe she'd fight something else. Their cousin or something. But that didn't happen. As she shouted into the surrounding darkness for answers, a flicker of something danced across her periphery. And then a miasma of darkness *blasted* across the platform, slamming into her body with the force of a freight train.

"Holy crap!"

Even with her arms crossed over her face, she could barely see. Grimacing under the pressure, she stabbed the Scissor Blade into the platform. She used her dad's secret weapon against the weird crap hitting her like a tidal wave. But it wasn't enough. Because the moment she gained the upper hand, taking a single step forward, the pressure doubled. And then tripled.

"The hell is happening!?"

Her sneakers squeaked against the stained glass. Her hair rustled in the maelstrom twisting through the dream-like environment. But no matter how much she struggled, it didn't appear to make any difference. By the time she found a semblance of balance, her sneakers were on the edge of the platform, barely holding on by a thread.

"But there's no reason to worry..."

One final burst of Darkness sent her stumbling into the infinite abyss.

"After all..."

She grasped wildly towards the platform, the Scissor Blade slipping from her fingers.

"... you've made this journey before..."

"RYUKO!"

Mako Mankanshoku knocked once... just enough to acknowledge her best friend's privacy. She knew better than anyone how grumpy Ryuko could be in the morning. And after studying all week for that test, she knew Ryuko wouldn't want to be disturbed. So, she knocked again, a little quieter, and opened the door. With a half-eaten croquette sticking out of her mouth and pieces of meat moving with every bite, she waved at the lump of blankets and disheveled hair on the bed, "Mom says if you're not downstairs in five minutes, she's going to make sure Guts eats your breakfast!"

"What!?"

The hazy remnants of the dream faded into forgotten fragments when Ryuko fell out of bed, her forehead hitting the floor with an angry *thump*. God damn it, that stung! Wincing as she heard Mako leave, humming the same stupid song everyone's been talking about

for the last week, she kicked away the lump of blankets. Like hell she'd let that mutt eat her delicious breakfast! Pulling her pajamas off one leg at a time, the snug shirt getting caught around her head, Ryuko cursed when she lost her balance, once more falling onto the ground.

"I'll be down in a minute!"

Last edited: Aug 17, 2018

Chapter 1.2

undead frog said:

Speaking of her fighting is she replacing Sora all together or will he still be running around.

Click to expand...

Click to shrink...

I'm sure you're not the only person to wonder about Sora. So, for the record, let me say this isn't a character swap. Ryuko isn't taking the place of Sora. He's currently living on Destiny Islands alongside Riku and Kairi.

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/b/b9/EP25-Preview1.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/640?cb=20140822034741>]

"Ugh..."

Barely trying to cover her mouth when she yawned, Ryuko stared down the street through bleary eyes. The hazy sun rising over the buildings to the east wasn't helping. And the constant noises from living in the city only made things worse. She couldn't remember the last time she felt this exhausted. It was almost like she spent the night getting her ass kicked by Ragyo Kiryuin and Nui Harime. And then forced to listen to one of Mikisugi's nightmarishly boring lectures on the history of Russia.

Another drawling yawn forced its way through her lips.

"What's wrong, Ryuko? You look really tired."

She struggled to match Mako's contagious happiness. She really did. But that was impossible. And in the end, Ryuko slumped

forward, sneakers dragging against the sidewalk. Attending Rinne High School was a pain in the ass. Honnouji Academy might have been annoying with everyone and their parents trying to kick her ass, and maybe half the crap she learned was pointless, but the cable cars Satsuki installed across the city meant she could get up ten minutes before homeroom, "I had this really strange dream last night."

"A mysterious dream?"

Mako leaned underneath Ryuko's arm, one finger flicking her lower lip, "Was it interesting? Did it have magical dragons or samurai fighting with weird swords?"

"I don't remember."

Ryuko ignored Mako's overactive imagination as a truck barreled down the street, splashing a puddle of water into the guy just down the sidewalk. She'd tumbled out of bed just over half an hour ago, but the strange dream was already nothing more than a faded memory. All she could remember were random bits and pieces that made no sense. Hazy images like the weird paintings Satsuki claimed their mom bought from some gallery. With a weary groan, she ran a hand down her face, tired eyes staring at the upcoming traffic, "But for some weird reason I feel like crap."

"Maybe you ate too much food," Mako ignored the green butterfly that almost landed on Ryuko, "Mom's cooking has been getting better lately. But that's probably because of the fresh ingredients since dad's no longer running a back-alley clinic."

Too much food...

The errant morning breeze suddenly grew several degrees colder.

It made no freaking sense. But for some weird reason, Mako's helpful comment made her remember something important about the dream. With a scowl, her sneakers *crunched* against the sidewalk as

the surrounding noises faded into the background. Now that she thought about it, she remembered floating in an ocean. And there was a man, maybe a woman, talking to her about something weird. Her right hand twitched at the off-colored, disjointed memory of the Scissor Blade. And something else. It was odd, but Ryuko had the strangest feeling she fought something in her dream. A monster. Or maybe a shadow? She couldn't remember.

And with an annoyed groan, rubbed her forehead.

What was the point remembering a stupid dream anyway?

"It's not important, Mako," she yawned as they stopped at the crosswalk, glaring at the cars racing back and forth through exhausted eyes, "Just a stupid dream, is all."

"You shouldn't ignore your dreams!"

Mako spun around, grabbing Ryuko's hands within her own, "Because dreams can predict the future!"

An awkward silence followed Mako's declaration as they stood on the edge of the sidewalk. Blinking owlishly at the comment, Ryuko leaned slightly away from her friend, subsequently missing the light changing from green to red, "... what?"

"That's right, Ryuko! They totally can! And I can prove it!"

She could see people staring at Mako. Not just random strangers, but some people they knew from school. Everyone at the intersection turned in their general directions, confused looks on their faces when Mako pouted and pumped one arm into the air, "It's a fact dreams are premonitions of the future! If you read between the lines and think really hard, you'll see that I'm right! As a matter of fact, I've had dreams where I've showed up to class naked as the day I was born! Or Lady Satsuki was yelling at me for not following the dress code! And the next day, those things totally happened!"

"Mako, I'm not sure that's..."

Ryuko prepared herself to counter Mako's imagination point by point. But seeing her friend's hopeful expression - and the awkward looks from idiotic bastards too stupid to realize it was a freaking private conversation - changed her mind. Sighing, she shook her head, shrugging nonchalantly, "Fine, maybe dreams can see the future."

A moment passed as the gathered crowd dispersed, perhaps a little slower than she found comfortable. But once they were relatively alone, Ryuko stepped into the street, staring at the white lines on the asphalt, "But it doesn't help if I can't remember anything!"

"Oh?"

Mako skipped cheerfully behind Ryuko, book bag swinging in her hand, "In that case, I suppose it's a good thing you wrote everything in your dream journal."

"Uh..."

After they graduated from Honnouji Academy, or whatever you wanted to call slicing apart the damn school while it was swinging Nudist Beach's ship like a weapon, and transferring to Rinne High School, Mako bought her a present. Her friend spent everything she had on a pink, heart-adorned journal that *oozed* cuteness. Something Nui Harime would have found adorable. Something she'd never touch in a million years. Not even if it meant taking down Ragyo Kiryuin. And yet, she couldn't. Because Mako had been happy. And seeing Mako so happy made *her* happy. So, she pinky swore to Mako she would write her dreams down.

And then completely forgot.

"I... um..."

"Ryuko! Look!"

By the time she blinked, Mako was standing down the street, her face pressed against the thin pane of glass separating her from the rows of televisions in the window of the neighborhood electronics store. Sighing in relief, Ryuko marched at a more leisurely pace after her best friend. If Mako was watching something, it was probably a cartoon about friendship. Or maybe one of those daytime operas with cheesy actors Mako's mom found interesting.

What she didn't expect was a boring news report.

"At the current time, scientists have been unable to determine the source of the meteor showers across the planet."

"Huh? Meteor showers?"

"A representative of the National Astronomical Observatory has stated the activity isn't associated with any known comets," a picture appeared above the balding anchor of the Tokyo skyline, "However, they wish to assure the public that the unexpected meteorological phenomenon has little chance of reaching the ground. Further reports indicate..."

"Wow! A meteor shower," Mako couldn't believe the amazing news, "We should get front row seats and watch it tonight!"

Ryuko thought about Mako's idea for about five seconds. And then walked away from the window, hands folded behind her neck. Who cared about some stupid rocks? As long as they didn't hit the ground, she didn't need to worry about getting crushed. But on the other hand, what if the meteors weren't rocks? Her breath hitched in the back of her throat. What if the meteors were bundles of Life Fibers? Senketsu might have absorbed Shinra Koketsu. But an entire blanket of Life Fibers had surrounded the goddamn world. Threads that might have been floating in space for several weeks.

Wait a second.

If people were going to Life Fibers and transform into COVERS, she needed to tell Mikisugi and that other guy.

Her eyebrow twitched. Like *hell* would she willingly watch Mikisugi strip naked, his gaudy clothes flying into the air while he shouted stupid crap about nudity. And to relieve herself of the mental image, she pulled Mako away from the window, leaving behind a cloudy smudge on the glass, "Come on, Mako."

Mako stared at her best friend... then at the expensive televisions showing a commercial about some new hair-cleaning product... and then back to Ryuko, "But aren't you super curious to see the space weather?"

"Not in the slightest!"

A phantom pain shot through Ryuko's stomach. Sometimes she would remember throwing everything at Ragyo Kiryuin. Using every scrap of power Senketsu borrowed from Junketsu and the other Goku Uniforms. And her mom's arrogant laughter when Shinra Koketsu drove Life Fiber spikes through their body. It wasn't something she liked thinking about, which was why Ryuko abruptly spun around and pushed Mako down the sidewalk, both hands pressed against her best friend's back, "Besides, I already went to space! Trust me, it's nowhere near as cool as it sounds!"

"But space *is* really cool, Ryuko!"

Mako leaned backwards, staring at her best friend with the world upside-down, "In the movies, everyone that goes to space has lots of fun! They fly around planets faster than the speed of light while fighting the forces of evil in climactic battles!"

"L-Like I said! Space isn't all it's cracked up to be!"

She closed her eyes, an embarrassed blush spreading across her cheeks. Maybe her experiences weren't normal. Perhaps even a bit bizarre. Maybe most people couldn't breathe in space or fly around

like it was nothing. And sure, a lot of people didn't have super awesome clothing. But what Mako said was pretty much what happened. Pushing harder... and then grabbing Mako's wrist when a bell rang in the distance... Ryuko sprinted full-tilt down the street.

"Oh crap! We gotta get to school! Like hell I'm getting detention for being late!"

Last edited: Feb 10, 2018

Chapter 1.3

It's funny. Hououmaru was an unrepentant accomplice to Ragyo Kiryuin's actions in my earlier story. Someone who killed several people without regret. Writing her as a genuinely benevolent person she was after Satsuki pulled her from the dark depths of her past is a weird change.

And sorry. I couldn't find a good picture of Satsuki with short hair.

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/3/3f/EP25-Preview10.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/640?cb=20140822034745>]

Satsuki took a moment's respite.

The task before her was daunting. Burdensome. A lesser person would collapse under the strain. Unable to cope with the weight of responsibility. But with callous disregard, she brushed aside the exhaustion. She accepted the responsibility of her position with head held high, refusing to concede even the slightest territory. For no one else, not even Ryuko, was capable of keeping the Kiryuin Conglomerate operational following their mother's death. Despite her vindictive nature, arrogance and cruelty, Ragyo Kiryuin was Revocs. Every decision went through her office. And without her considerable presence, the conglomerate built upon the backs of humanity threatened to collapse. Taking most of the world's economy with it.

If not for Hououmaru's expertise, she might have been overwhelmed assuming the mantle of CEO of the Kiryuin Conglomerate.

And yet...

She took a deep breath, focusing her thoughts inward, before opening the next folder, steel blue eyes narrowing at the name. The former CEO of a textile company. One of the casualties of Ragyo

Kiryuin's endless greed and ambition. With the Board of Directors and middle management destroyed - or rather, having sacrificed themselves to the Original Life fiber - her task was simple. Replacing all the subservient men and women who begged Ragyo Kiryuin for the smallest scraps of power with people worthy of the title 'human.' And someone who refused her mother's substantial offers time after time, until her fellow executives forced an early retirement, had potential.

Placing the woman's resume on the modest pile to her right, Satsuki leaned backwards, the faux leather chair crinkling.

"What is it, Hououmaru?"

From her position to Satsuki's left, standing in front of the screen displaying the Kiryuin Conglomerate's worldwide market share, Rei Hououmaru raised a finger to her ear, "It's Revocs security. Aikuro Mikisugi has requested an immediate meeting. He claims it's important."

"Mikisugi?"

The name clung to the air alongside her curiosity. Aikuro Mikisugi. That was a name she hadn't expected. And for good reason. In the aftermath of Ragyo Kiryuin's death, the undercover splendid naked officer had formally discarded his nudity. A vow broken during Hououmaru's misguided attempt at seeking vengeance against Ryuko and herself. Arching an eyebrow as she contemplated why Aikuro Mikisugi, the newest professor of European History at Osaka University, stood upon her doorstep, Satsuki grimaced, "Am I to presume he didn't give a reason?"

"I'm afraid not."

Hououmaru's confirmation was appreciated yet unnecessary considering the circumstances. Aikuro Mikisugi was many things. Odd. Eccentric. An exhibitionist. But his knowledge on Life Fibers couldn't be questioned. Neither could his intuition. Only one thing

would force him to travel from Osaka to Revocs instead of calling or sending an email. A subject she had presumed destroyed if Ragyo Kiryuin's promise wasn't anything more than a last-minute act of spite against Ryuko for stopping the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet.

"I see. Inform security to send him up."

Her gaze hardened at the approaching point of discussion, "And cancel my appointments for the afternoon."

"As you wish, Lady Satsuki."

The measured steps as Hououmaru left her office offered little comfort.

And in the middle that followed her assistant's departure, Satsuki took the opportunity to properly assess the situation. It was clear from Aikuro Mikisugi's insistence to personally meet that Life Fibers had returned. Or threatened to do so. And if that was the case, Revocs was more than prepared to assist in their destruction. Preventing anyone from stumbling upon yet another Original Life Fiber. The innumerable technologies invented by Ragyo Kiryuin alongside the Anti-Life Fiber weapons utilized by Nudist Beach were more than adequate to stop a second incursion before it began.

"It's funny..."

Her eyes snapped open at the familiar creaking of the mahogany doors, "Nudist Beach tried to bug your mother's office for years. And here I am walking through the front door like an old friend."

Gone was the guise of a middle-aged man, back hunched and blue hair disheveled, in the midst of a social crisis. No longer did Aikuro Mikisugi conceal his identity.

Satsuki glowered at the rhythmic sound of Italian leather soles against the marble floor of her office.

Following Ragyo Kiryuin's death and Hououmaru's salvation, Aikuro Mikisugi resumed his normal appearance. And dressed in an incredibly flamboyant manner. Custom-fitted black pants and a semi-unbuttoned white dress shirt whose collar was popped. Nothing resembling the attire befitting an otherwise unassuming history professor working towards tenure.

"I presume this isn't a social visit, Aikuro Mikisugi?"

Her eyes swept across the retired nudist's appearance before focusing upon the metal case in his right hand, "I was under the impression Nudist Beach no longer existed."

"You were always rather clever, Miss Kiryuin."

An amused chuckle, one more of recognition than humor, was his only response as he laid the metal case upon Satsuki's desk, "With the Original Life Fiber destroyed, the organization founded by Professor Matoi fulfilled its obligations. However, even without Life Fibers, the numerous inventions patented by your father can still benefit the world. Philanthropic work is the fashion these days."

"Is that so? Then please, allow me to cut to the heart of the matter."

Satsuki loomed over the former nudist despite the difference between their respective heights, "Have you discovered another source of Life Fibers?"

"No."

The simple answer, nothing more than a single word in the negative, interrupted the young woman's prepared speech. Eliciting an imperceptible expression of genuine astonishment as he sat down, "Tell me, Miss Kiryuin. Have you been paying attention to the news?"

"You're referring to the meteor showers, no doubt."

Any remaining astonishment was suppressed beneath forceful stoicism. If Aikuro Mikisugi didn't throw her afternoon into chaos over a potential incursion of Life Fibers, there was no further reason to waste her breath. But to mention meteor showers, an otherwise normal phenomenon? With a breathless sigh, she sat down, already prepared to inform Hououmaru to cancel her previous orders, "I've been too busy reorganizing Revocs to pay attention to such trivialities."

"Then I suppose I shouldn't waste any more of your valuable time," Aikuro smirked at Satsuki's flippant dismissal, "A few days ago, Tsumugu heard about some rather strange rumors."

"Rumors?"

The oppressive silence intensified when Aikuro Mikisugi's finger began tapping against the steel portmanteau, "Up near Yamagata, near the border of Akita, some of the locals claimed pieces of the sky fell to the ground. Rumors about strange metals spread through word-of-mouth down the countryside until Tsumugu decided to investigate. And he, in turn, contacted me."

"Not out of the ordinary," Satsuki absorbed the information with aplomb, only closing her eyes when she found no reason for Aikuro Mikisugi's unwarranted concern, "Meteorites are fairly common."

"I'd like to believe this is different."

Satsuki frowned at the uncharacteristic seriousness accentuating the former nudist's response. Yet she deliberately waited until his incessant tapping ceased before asking, "What are we dealing with?"

"I'm not exactly sure. We were hoping you could lend a hand..."

He inputted the six-digit password, pausing between the third and fourth number as an extra security precaution, before pressing his thumb against the fingerprint scanner. As the locks along the edges

unlatched with a sharp hiss of pressurized air, he flipped open the portmanteau, exposing its contents to the world, "Because, quite frankly, we're stumped."

At first glance, it wasn't extraordinary.

But then curiosity whispered in the back of her mind. And with it, growing suspicion and concern.

She now understood Aikuro Mikisugi's hesitation to simply explain what Tsumugu Kinagase discovered over the phone. For it defied reasonable explanation. At first glance, the material secured within the steel briefcase appeared quaint. Nothing more exceptional than polished green glass in the shape of a six-pointed star. Perhaps something one would purchase within a local souvenir store. But the pentagram-like shape within the star, a sharp crimson that stood in contrast to the surrounding emerald, piqued her interest far more than it should.

"I understand your worries."

Her chair creaked as she leaned backwards, sighing wistfully in thought, "Hououmaru will inform the Research and Development Division to prepare the necessary equipment. This is not something we can simply ignore."

"What about Ryuko?"

"No. This doesn't concern her."

A mild bitterness accompanied her refusal to consider Aikuro Mikisugi's proposal. There was nothing wrong with his question. In fact, it would be pragmatic. But she could not. Ryuko already shouldered the burden of ending their mother's tyranny and the Original Life Fiber's stranglehold upon humanity. Accomplishing what she'd dreamt about for thirteen years. It was a momentous victory, yet one that came with heavy consequences.

But his point nevertheless remained.

Her eyes snapped open, displaying sternness not witnessed since Honnouji Academy sunk into Tokyo Bay. If the meteor showers were an ill omen of things to come, *she* would prepare accordingly. Not Ryuko. Until absolutely necessary, she refused to shatter the peace and tranquility her sister obtained. To destroy Ryuko's hard-earned normal life. In the same breath required to stand at attention, Satsuki glared at the former nudist, "If Ryuko's involvement becomes necessary, I shall inform her. Is that understood, Aikuro Mikisugi?"

"Of course."

An ordinary man would have collapsed under the threat behind Satsuki Kiryuin's ambitious words. And the accompanying backdrop of light would render most people blind. But Aikuro considered himself a rather splendid individual. With a bashful smirk, he ran a hand through his hair, concealing the nervous twitch plaguing the right side of his face, "After all, Ryuko needs to focus on her studies if she wants to get into a good university, right?"

"Call Tsumugu Kinagase and tell him analysis of this material will be our top priority."

Satsuki brushed aside the man's attempt at getting into her good graces, "Also, if you wish to walk out of this building under your own recognizance, do not mention Ryuko's education in front of me again. Do we have an understanding?"

Last edited: Feb 12, 2018

Chapter 1.4

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/9/9b/Ry%C5%ABko_Matoi_close-up.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140211124359]

"Flying! I'm flying! Flying like a candy rocket through the sky!"

As Mako skipped along the brick wall next to the sidewalk, Ryuko halfheartedly placed one foot in front of the other. The bag hanging from her shoulder was overstuffed, a single book poking through the hole in the bottom. Did her teachers have to give them so much homework? There weren't enough hours in the day to finish everything! Stuffing her hands into the pockets of her jacket, she stared upwards, into the overcast skies, when Mako's singing about planes, rockets and other things began resembling nails streaking down a chalkboard.

"You seem happy, Mako."

"That's because something super-duper wonderful happened, Ryuko!"

Mako vaulted onto her hands before launching herself off the wall, "A school club asked me, Mako Mankanshoku, to join them!"

"A club, huh?"

Ryuko caught her best friend without missing a beat, barely shrugging under the additional weight of Mako and an overstuffed bag, "Which one?"

"It's a really cool one," disheveled brown hair matched Mako's infectious smile as she plopped her best friend feet-first onto the ground, "The Accounting Club!"

"The accounting... wait, what?"

A raven cawed in the distance, breaking the pregnant silence as Ryuko *desperately* tried processing everything Mako confessed. The Accounting Club? There was no freaking way her best friend would get invited to someplace so nerdy. And boring. Some of those guys were in her classes. They didn't have a 'fun' or 'cool' bone in their bodies!

But the more she thought about it, the more it made sense.

Mako *had* done all the boring paperwork when she formed the Fight Club back at Honnouji Academy. It was a little hazy, but she remembered Mako throwing herself into Gamagori's stupid forms and charts without complaining. Not even once. Scratching her chin when Mako leaned closer, brown eyes literally sparkling from excitement, Ryuko pushed all suspicion from her mind, "Eh, I'm sure you'll have lots of fun."

"Really!?"

"Hey, you were really kickass running the Fight Club," she countered Mako's enthusiastic smile with one of her own, "And this time, it's your decision, Mako. So, if you want to help those nerds, go for -"

Something brushed against her mind.

"Huh?"

As Mako rambled about the Accounting Club, Ryuko glanced over her shoulder, completely confused. For a moment, she swore somebody was watching them. But no matter how hard she looked, the street was abandoned. Even the normal afternoon traffic was gone. Frowning at the ominous silence, a few choice words settling on the tip of her tongue, she eventually shrugged, the weird sensation already forgotten.

"Anyway..."

She folded her hands against the back of her neck, drawling out the word as Mako's attention predictably wavered, "You know what your mom's cooking for dinner?"

"Uh huh! I saw her buy everything during yesterday's big bargain sale," Mako's bag swung alongside her bobbing head, the second-hand leather case bouncing on the worn straps, "She said we're having her super special mystery..."

Ryuko stiffened when another presence, the same as earlier, plucked at something in her chest.

Only this time, it was much closer.

"There's no point hiding!"

Her sneakers crunched against the asphalt as she pivoted, intent on confronting the asshole stalking them. Mako might not have sensed anything wrong, but *she* did. There was something strange on the wind. A weird presence. Something that raised warning bells. It was unlike anything she'd felt before. Not against Nui Harime. Not even when she fought Ragyo Kiryuin in orbit. This was different. Stronger. More intense. More *real*.

"Um... who are you shouting at, Ryuko?"

Mako peeked around Ryuko, staring down the empty street with one finger poking her cheek, "Oh, don't tell me you have another imaginary friend."

"Stay back, Mako," Ryuko protectively grabbed her best friend's arm when something shifted in the corner of her eye, "Because we have company."

"Now, isn't this a pleasant surprise."

A shiver raced down her spine at the obnoxious voice literally *oozing* sarcasm. She grunted, glaring through narrowed eyes at the guy

standing behind them. The strange feeling in the back of her mind... that disturbing wrongness... was stronger than ever. Stepping between Mako and their eavesdropper, the corners of her mouth twisted into a glower. So, this was the bastard stalking them. He sounded suspicious as hell. And his outfit didn't look anywhere in the same ballpark as normal. A red and black bodysuit with far too many belts and matching skirt? And a helmet covering his face?

The guy looked like he stepped out of a freaking costume store.

"Finally decided to show your ugly face, huh?"

To her annoyance, the bastard didn't take the bait. Instead of saying anything useful, like why the hell he was following them, the guy folded his arms, an amused chuckle echoing from inside his helmet, "You sensed me. Even after I went through all the effort of concealing my presence. Aren't you special."

"Thanks."

She chuckled at the backhanded compliment, "But if you call that hiding, then I have some *really* bad news for you."

"Impressive," he mockingly ignored her insult, "For an idiot from a backwater world, that is."

The urge to grind the bastard's face into the pavement bubbled to the surface. Her fingers twitched, the corner of her mouth twisting into a scowl. There was no freaking way she would let this punk get away. But something about his pathetic attempt at an insult didn't feel right. World? What the hell did that mean? The guy was bizarre. She'd admit that much. Not to mention creepy. And he was fast. Way faster than expected because she couldn't sense any Life Fibers in his ugly costume.

An errant tremble rippled down her spine.

This didn't make any freaking sense! How could the bastard move so quickly when his clothes didn't have a trace of the stuff? Biting the inside of her cheek, Ryuko grimaced when the air surrounding the guy rippled, temporarily turning a deep purple-black, "Another world, huh?"

As the wind picked up, curling through the nearly empty street until it whistled in her ears, Ryuko decided to push the envelope, "Well, in that case, I think you're batcrap crazy!"

It was brief, but she noticed the guy's posture change, "You want to know what I think? I think you're lying through your teeth! Or you're an asshole! Or better yet, you're one of Ragyo Kiryuin's goons too stupid to realize she's never coming back!"

A moment passed as she waited for the guy's reaction.

Mako blinked in confusion when the stalker unfolded his arms.

And then *laughed*.

"You're a lot stupider than I thought," he tapped a finger against his helmet, every word oozing sarcasm, "And for a moment I believed you would prove somewhat interesting."

Her eyebrow twitched, "What's that supposed to mean, dipshit?"

"So many questions for a nobody. Well, if you insist..."

The guy raised his hand, as if grasping for something in the air, before changing his mind, "You know what? On second thought, I'm not going to tell you anything."

"Then I'll just have to kick your smug ass!"

Ryuko fully intended to back up her threat with physical violence. Maybe smashed the guy's head into the brick wall just enough to get the point across. But his taunting laughter as he circled to her right, boots crunching against the gravel strewn across the street, gave

her second thoughts. The guy was searching for something. Or rather, he was looking over her body in a very creepy way. And when he stopped walking, mockingly wagging a finger at her lack of action, her mouth twitched, "Oh? In that case, knock yourself out. But between you and me, I'm beginning to think your 'intuition' was a fluke. Nothing more. You simply got lucky, is all."

"Is that right?"

Thanks to weeks of practice, when she tossed the overstuffed bag over her shoulder, Mako caught it without prompting. A team effort immediately derailed when her best friend faltered under the weight of their homework. Maybe the stalker gave off a bad vibe. But there was no freaking way he was tougher than the neighborhood thugs. All she needed to do was watch out for his speed.

But that wasn't a problem.

Because Sanageyama was faster than this guy.

Her mouth curled into a manic grin as she punched one fist into the other, "Keep talking, asshole! Because kicking your ass will be the most fun I've had all day!"

"You have guts. I'll admit that much. But like I said..."

Ryuko *felt* the guy moving before he vanished.

By the time she realized what happened, the bastard was in front of them, his boot carving a path through the air. The hell? How did he move so *fast*!? Reacting instinctively, she grabbed Mako and leapt backwards, clearing the entire street in a single bound. As she touched down on the ground, Ryuko ignored the smell of burning rubber. With the new sneakers Mako's mom bought her for school ruined, her eyebrow twitched. Fingers grasping for the Scissor Blade weeks after the weapon sunk into Tokyo Bay. Extremely ticked off as Mako stumbled away, woozy from the abrupt mid-afternoon flight, Ryuko glared at the bastard.

Something about their stalker seemed different. Like he didn't expect her to avoid his straightforward kick.

Her teeth clicked together as she spat onto the ground. Alright, maybe she underestimated his speed. But nothing else changed! She could still handle this guy! He was fast, but it wasn't anything compared to Nui Harime. The psychotic bitch would have easily run circles around the bastard. And Ragyo Kiryuin would have wiped the floor with him before he knew what hit him.

But there was something else.

She only saw it for a moment. Right when his foot almost smashed into her stomach.

The bastard had been covered by something that looked an awful lot like shadows.

And it felt *wrong*.

Just what the hell was this guy?

"Color me intrigued."

Her opponent slowly lowered his foot, helmet never straying from their target, "Not many idiots can move that quickly. And I was actually trying to hit you. Lucky for you, I have better things to do. Or I'd stick around and play a little longer."

"Like hell! If you think I'll let you..."

The words died into a strangled gasp when a swirling vortex of darkness appeared behind the guy. The hell? Ryuko didn't have the slightest clue what was happening, but this definitely wasn't Life Fibers. Not even Ragyo Kiryuin could pull off a stunt like this! And whatever *this* was, it gave off the same disturbing sensation as the bastard. Like the guy messed around with something important. But when he turned around, walking into the darkness like she couldn't

do anything about it, she was already halfway down the block, intent on ripping that ugly helmet off his head.

Only for her fingers to scrap through the empty air.

"Ryuko!"

She huffed angrily, spitting to the side as Mako stepped into the middle of the street, hopping over cracks in the asphalt, "That guy was super weird, wasn't he? And that swirling portal looked like our toilet when mom brings home the wrong detergent."

"Yeah, I know."

Her best friend gasped and, with widening eyes, spun around, one hand waving through the air, "Oh! I know that phrase! Does this mean we're going to chase him down?"

"Nah!"

Perhaps the refusal was too loud. Or sudden. But Ryuko didn't care, "I have better things to do than hunt down some random punk who thinks he's something special."

"But what about that dark stuff, Ryuko?"

"Huh?"

"It was purple... and blue... and a little black," Mako motioned randomly with her hands as she attempted to replicate the darkness surrounding the guy. Including mimicking his posture and voice, "And that masked guy gave off some really weird vibes. Like something was missing. Like he was working a thousand-piece puzzle with only five hundred pieces. Or when mom has to improvise ingredients for dinner."

"Yeah, I guess."

Ryuko grabbed her book bag off the sidewalk as Mako started talking about dinner, mystery croquettes and everything involving the Accounting Club. With a snort, she marched after Mako, placing one foot in front of the other. She didn't understand anything about that guy. He wasn't wearing Life Fibers. So, how the hell did he move so fast and create that strange shadow portal? It didn't make sense. There had to be an explanation.

But when nothing came to mind, she shrugged, following after Mako, who was listing everything her mom locked in the freezer.

Whoever the guy was... whatever he wanted... it had nothing to do with her.

But if she ever saw him again, she'd grind his face into the ground.

Last edited: Feb 15, 2018

Unknown Report 1

Unknown Report 1

A car horn beeped somewhere in the distance before, with a loud *crash*, it collided with a street light.

"Heh..."

Finding this place hadn't been easy. The world was so far off the beaten path, separated from the countless other specks of miserable light in the darkness, he almost hadn't noticed the disturbance. Most worlds were so close it took literally no time to hop from one to another. Minutes. Maybe an hour at the most. But this one? If the old coot hadn't callously dismissed him out of some half-baked idea of lowering suspicion on himself, he probably wouldn't bothered coming. Spending most of an entire day wasn't his concept of amusement.

Particularly when there were countless other sources of entertainment.

One of his fledgling emotions, brilliant green apart from its red eyes, manifested out of nothingness. A brief existence quickly brought to an end upon being cleaved in two.

If he had to guess, the old coot didn't know anything about this place. And even if he did, the geezer wasn't in any position to talk. Not when he was busy pretending to be the 'remorseful old friend' apologizing for countless years of shameful behavior. It was pathetic, not to mention outright terrible, acting. He was honestly bewildered anyone believed the man. But that wasn't his problem. Idiots would be idiots. And the faster they died, the sooner he could be complete.

As the midday sun peaked overhead, flickers of darkness writhed around his fingers.

With the idiot still too weak for their reunion, he had nothing better to do. Literally nothing apart from spreading pieces of himself across the worlds while making sure those powerful enough to interfere were too busy dealing with their own problems. So, if investigating an unexplored world infuriated the geezer, that really wasn't his fault. For the time being, he was free to do whatever he pleased. Darkness defined every fiber of his being.

It was his very existence.

And that's why he was sitting on the roof of a so-called skyscraper, feet dangling more than two hundred meters above the streets packed with miserable and pathetic humans.

Because there was something strange about this world. A certain difference he couldn't quite place. When he'd passed through the broken remnants of the world's barrier, the first piece of evidence he hadn't wasted his time, an intriguing sensation slammed against his woefully incomplete heart. Something had been here before him. He could sense its lingering presence on every facet of the world. On every *person*. It felt ancient. Older beyond recognition. And the more he focused on it... the more he tried understanding *what* it was... the more questions he had.

A powerful darkness clashing against brilliant light had called him.

It had summoned him from across the universe.

Who was he to ignore such a personal invitation?

But his arrival had been anything but overwhelming. Contrary to his expectations, the world lacked even the basic understanding of interesting. No matter how hard he looked, the place was just another backwater world. No, on second thought, that was being too generous to the other worlds. Because there was something *e/se* different about this place. Despite the last vestiges of the ancient presence clinging to the world's existence, something that should have made his arrival amusing, he couldn't sense magic.

Everything on the world - from the somebodies to the machinery to the buildings themselves - lacked magic.

"Oh?"

An intriguing sensation whispered within the furthest depths of his broken heart.

And he chuckled.

It wouldn't be long now. Days. Weeks. Maybe even a few hours. Thanks to somebody, or something, destroying the world's barrier, there was nothing standing in their way. It was only a matter of time. Once they found the keyhole... and devoured the heart lying within... this world and everyone on it would fade into darkness.

But until that happened, he needed to find something interesting to pass the time.

Original Version

I have to give someone props. Reaching this place wasn't easy. It's so out of the beaten path that I almost didn't notice the disturbance. If Master hadn't sent me away to lower suspicion of himself, I probably wouldn't have bothered coming. Wasting a day to reach this place wasn't fun. But that's what made this interesting. This world is nothing more than an insignificant speck of light in an overwhelming ocean of darkness. A single point of illumination. The other worlds are so close that it takes literally no time to hop from one to another.

But this world?

There's nothing surrounding it but darkness.

Darkness and boredom.

I'm guessing Master doesn't know anything about this place. He's too busy pretending to be the 'kind, remorseful' friend apologizing

for tearing apart their friendship. It's pathetic. His acting's so terrible that it's shocking nobody suspects anything. But while he's working to lure the idiot away from his friends, making sure everything's ready for our reunion, I decided to have some fun. Of course, Master will be annoyed when he discovers I ignored his orders.

But that's not my problem.

With the idiot still too weak, there's nothing better to do. Literally nothing. I've spread pieces of myself across the Realm of Light. Made sure those strong enough to interfere were too busy dealing with their own problems.

So, if taking a look around an unexplored world infuriates the guy, that's really his fault, right?

For the time being, I'm free to do whatever I want.

To have some fun until *he* becomes strong enough.

But when I passed through the broken remnants of the world's barrier, I found that something else came here before me. An unfamiliar sensation permeated the world right down to the Heart, tainted with darkness yet radiating light. It was like nothing I've ever felt. Nothing I've experienced alongside Master. It felt ancient. Older beyond recognition.

And it called for me.

Drew me towards the center of the realm.

Who was I to ignore such a personal invitation?

But my arrival was underwhelming. The place was boring and grey, lacking even the basic concept of interesting. No matter how hard I looked, it was just another backwater world full of pathetic people going about their boring lives. No different from the rest. At first, I planned to release my fledgling emotions. Draw out this world's

protector and see what this place could offer. But what would be the point when nobody could put up a fight?

When squeezing the life from people takes no effort?

Yet, no matter where I look, I still feel that presence lingering in the air. But I can't find anything. And as I walk throughout the streets, hidden from view using a spell even an amateur mage could break, not one insect notices me. Maybe my expectations were too high. I'm tempted to leave. There's no point sticking around. Not when it's only a matter of time before this world vanishes.

I don't know how or why, or really even care, but something screwed with the Door.

Meteor showers? How stupid.

It won't be long until everything fades into darkness.

If I wanted to have some fun, I would feel *sorry* for these people.

But you know what? I think I'll stick around until the end.

Maybe I'll find something interesting to pass the time.

Last edited: Jan 29, 2019

Chapter 1.5

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/8/80/EP5-4.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140608210148>]

"Commence phase five testing. Full parameters."

As the researcher directly under his authority, the normal director of research and development at Revocs, responded in the affirmative, Aikuro leaned backwards, chair creaking under his weight. Working at Revocs headquarters? After everything that happened, it felt like a dream. Or perhaps a nightmare. Sure, he was no longer one of Nudist Beach's finest splendid naked officers. But things changed. Bygones were bygones. And without Ragyo Kiryuin determined to envelop humanity in a blanket of Life Fibers, their former sworn adversary was nothing more than the most powerful conglomerate in the world under new, and decidedly improved, management.

But this?

He didn't know what to think.

At first glance, it was nothing more than another meteorite Tsumugu collected from Yamagata. After his demonstration earned Satsuki's scientific curiosity, he asked Tsumugu to gather a few more samples. Preferably without injuring or contaminating himself. But whatever material composed the meteorites, they were remarkable. Unlike anything discovered. Including Life Fibers. Highly malleable. Resistant to a variety of physical forces. Capable of withstanding stresses far beyond the limits of Goku Uniforms but not quite Kamui.

It was extraordinary.

"Out of my way."

Aikuro smirked at the familiar voice forcing its way across the control room, "You're early."

"There are two things you need to know."

Tsumugu Kinagase ignored the men and women who, not even two months ago, helped Ragyo Kiryuin in her insane efforts to sacrifice humanity to clothing, "First, stepping foot inside Revocs, no matter who's sitting in the boss's chair, sends shivers down my spine. Second..."

He didn't bother hiding his disgust before handing the exhibitionist one of the two scalding cups of coffee, "You look like a sack of crap. Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed or something?"

"It's not *that* bad..."

An eye-blistered orange and yellow light slammed into the windows. The control room shook from the searing flames engulfing the test chamber, waves of burning heat barely managing to penetrate through the thick glass and protective coating. Unbothered by the sudden change in temperature, Aikuro ran a hand through his disheveled hair, chuckling embarrassingly at his friend's observation, "It's five in the morning on a Sunday. I should be grading papers on the early twentieth century. But Miss Satsuki called in a favor. The magnanimous man that I am, I accepted her offer of cooperation without hesitation."

"She threatened you, didn't she?"

It had intended to be a joke. Nothing more than a bluff. But the pathetic series of denials towards his spurious accusation gave him second thoughts. Scoffing under his breath, Tsumugu crashed into the only unoccupied chair in the room, "So, where is little miss big shot?"

Aikuro sipped his coffee, intending to calm his nerves from Tsumugu's lucky guess, before nearly spitting it out. This was the

wrong order. But given how early it was, not to mention he personally ordered his friend out of bed in the middle of the night, asking for something else would push the envelope. Swallowing what amounted to liquid dirt, he yawned, "She's out of the office."

"At six in the morning? What, is there a fashion show going on somewhere?"

He shrugged at his friend's criticism, "She called out of the blue. Said there was urgent business she needed to deal with. Asked if I was available to take over researching the meteorites until she returned."

"Sounds suspicious as hell, don't you think?"

"Satsuki's not Ragyo Kiryuin, if that's what you're asking," he took another sip, forcing down the disgusting coffee with the patience of a dying man, "She might have shown Hououmaru leniency, but her heart's in the right place. And Revocs *has* turned over a new leaf under her management."

"Can't argue with that..."

Tsumugu lit a cigarette, filling the room with the scent of burning tobacco. As much as he wanted to argue, the bastard made an excellent point. Whether he liked it or not, and whatever she did to Nudist Beach, Satsuki Kiryuin was instrumental in stopping her mother and ending the tyranny of Life Fibers. So, for the time being and against his better judgment, he would give her the benefit of the doubt.

At least until she did anything suspicious.

"Still, since you called me down here in the middle of the freaking night..."

A single gulp, more than half of the cup, vanished alongside a grumble, "I'm assuming you discovered something about these strange rocks?"

"I can say with absolute confidence the meteor showers are unrelated to Ragyo Kiryuin and Life Fibers."

The tension could be cut with a knife as Tsumugu glared through the burning glass, refusing to look his friend in the eye. He'd known from the beginning the meteorites weren't made from Life Fibers. Not when Matoi claimed her Kamui absorbed the Original Life Fiber and Ragyo Kiryuin's extremely gaudy dress. But he'd hoped his instincts were wrong. Because he could deal with the alien parasites. They had weapons capable of destroying the threads. But something new? Another form of alien life? How the hell could they prepare against an unknown threat?

With a curse, he finished the rest of his coffee, "Do you have any *good* news?"

"Well, these meteorites aren't sentient."

"We should destroy every last piece," Tsumugu scoffed at Aikuro's boundless naivety as the flames enveloping the test chamber flickered before fading. He could see one of the strange space rocks sitting in the middle of the room. A brilliant blue chunk of unblemished *something*. More than a minute inside searing flames hot enough to damage Life Fibers and it didn't have a damn scratch, "Considering our last experience with extraterrestrial visitors deciding to make themselves home, there's no reason to be optimistic."

"I'm more pragmatic than optimistic."

Aikuro appreciated his friend's bewilderment before the situation removed any remaining traces of amusement, "Even if you're correct and destroying them is the only solution, Nudist Beach no longer technically exists. We don't have the money or resources to launch a world-wide recovery operation. And Miss Satsuki announced she won't lend a hand without solid evidence the meteorites pose a legitimate danger."

"... hence the tests."

Tsumugu scoffed at his colleague's trusting nature. He didn't like this. Even if these things weren't Life Fibers, or had anything to do with the parasites, the timing of their arrival had to mean something, "Matoi takes down Ragyo Kiryuin and a few weeks later strange rocks start falling over the planet? Call me crazy, but there's a connection. We just haven't found it yet."

"I'll admit the timing is suspect."

The retired splendid naked officer finished his coffee while listening to the researchers pour over the newest batch of data, "By the way, how did you collect so much of the stuff?"

"They're lighter than they look."

Tsumugu propped his arm over the side of the chair, faint wisps of smoke rising from the cigarette clenched between his teeth, "Made things a lot easier. One of the rocks had to be over two feet long. Couldn't have weighed more than ten kilograms."

"A light, impossibly strong material resistant that comes in all shapes and sizes? It almost sounds like magic," Aikuro sighed wistfully when his joke fell flat, "But you shouldn't worry yourself, Tsumugu. We're not planning on using it. Not for clothing, weapons or anything else. If this *is* another invasion, we need to know everything about what we might be dealing with. Properties. Weaknesses. Strengths. Everything. Although..."

"Although what?"

Aikuro grinned audaciously, matching his colleague's confusion, "These meteorites need a name. Something unique. I would give them a name myself. But since *you* not only discovered but brought them to our attention..."

The former nudist resisted the urge to punch his friend. Without bothering about manners, Tsumugu dragged his feet off the console, allowing the combat boots to slam against the floor hard enough to

draw unwanted attention. He didn't know what Aikuro was thinking. He sucked at naming things. For a moment, he wanted to pass on the responsibility. Prevent falling into an embarrassing pitfall. But he stopped. The bastard had a point. Even if he didn't personally discover the space rocks, without his investigation, everybody would be stumbling in the dark.

"Fine. Have it your way."

A resigned sigh was all he was willing to give Aikuro. And not anything more, "If you're *really* going to force me to do this, I guess I'll call the stuff... Space Steel."

He expected something. Maybe a chuckle or comment about originality.

But there was nothing but an awkward silence. Even the faceless scientists in the room, the cold bastards who more than likely helped Ragyo Kiryuin's insane plot to cover everything in a freaking Life Fiber planet, stopped and looked at him. In response to the unwanted attention, his fingers instinctively reached towards the sewing needle machine gun on his waist only to stop when he remembered, as a retired officer, he no longer has access to Nudist Beach's arsenal.

His anger smoldering, Tsumugu grunted at Aikuro's flat expression and decided to quickly change the subject, "Have you told Matoi?"

"Satsuki doesn't want her involved."

Aikuro took the subtle threat underlying Tsumugu's question with perfect aplomb. Prodding his colleague about the lackluster name for the exotic material would lead to consequences beyond comprehension, "And she's not wrong. Unless we're certain these meteorites are dangerous and don't simply have an awful sense of timing, there's no reason to bother Ryuko."

"Fair enough."

Tsumugu shrugged before propping his feet back onto the console with a loud *thump*. It pissed him off, but Aikuro made a damn good point. Maybe it was being paranoid. If these rocks were anything like Life Fibers, he would have already destroyed them. Then told him what happened. And then, after that, informed Nudist Beach of the situation, returning all nudists to their respective duties.

Before calling Matoi himself.

"But since you called me in the middle of the goddamn night for a field report, do me a favor and shut up," working the kinks out of his shoulder, he glared at Aikuro, daring the guy to say another word, before closing his eyes. If there was nothing else to do, he might as well get some sleep until Satsuki Kiryuin returned from her little vacation. After all, it wasn't like the world was going to end anytime soon.

Chapter 1.6

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/e/e6/ED1_GnIj1.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140717081351]

"Crap! Crap! Crap!"

Ryuko *hated* the rain with every fiber of her being. It soaked into her clothes. Got into her shoes. Made her entire day miserable. Holding the drenched bag over her head, water splashed upwards as she darted between the puddles forming in the street. Sneakers blemished by their confrontation with the masked bastard dancing around potholes and cracks. Damn it! The stupid weather report said it was going to be sunny all afternoon! Not freaking thunderstorms out of nowhere!

All but jumping the last few meters to the front door, Ryuko stopped just inside Mako's house, rain dripping from her body. Gasping for breath after sprinting full-tilt through the storm across the city, she blew out the side of her mouth, dislodging the soaked crimson bang lying flat against her face.

"Stupid freaking weather..."

Taking a sopping, miserable step further into the house, Ryuko grunted before throwing the rain-soaked bag against the wall. Damn homework! If the library wasn't halfway across the city, she wouldn't have been caught outside! With an exhausted groan, she kicked off her sneakers, puddles of water already forming around them. Shambling towards the stairs, dreams of a hot shower filled her mind. All she wanted was to dry herself off. But she paused, then blinked, at the two extra pairs of shoes between Mako's and her mom's.

One significantly larger than a normal person's.

And another that she recognized.

"Huh?"

Pressing her ear against the wall separating the front door from the kitchen, Ryuko immediately scowled. She could hear Gamagori's boisterous voice. For some strange reason, he was telling Mako something about his uncle. As if Mako cared about metalworking! But if Gamagori was here, that meant only one thing. Scratching the back of her neck, she involuntarily yawned before shambling towards the kitchen, water dripping from her jacket, and said the first thing that came to mind.

"What are you doing here, Satsuki?"

"Matoi! Show Lady Satsuki proper respect!"

"Respect? It's my freaking house," she returned Gamagori's glare three-fold, undaunted by his threatening tone, "That means *you* should show *me* respect! And you can start by getting down on your hands and knees and apologizing!"

A vein bulged on the former Disciplinary Committee Chair's temple, "HOW DARE YOU -"

"It's fine, Gamagori."

Satsuki brushed aside the playful schism between Ryuko and Gamagori with unyielding dignity. And, as expected, Gamagori heeded her advice, backing down with only a faint murmur of discontent. Ryuko's criticism, although unwarranted, was predictable. Her visit was unplanned, a stark departure from their burgeoning relationship. But with Gamagori standing at her side, both flustered by his inability to cow Ryuko and visibly embarrassed by Mankanshoku's infectious happiness, she countered her sister's

defiance with a single question, "When were you planning on mentioning your confrontation with a certain individual?"

"Huh? Are you talking about that weird guy?"

"Mankanshoku informed me two days ago," she watched Ryuko, clearing bothered by the knowledge, remove her jacket, water dripping from the sleeves onto the floor, "I'm surprised you didn't tell me yourself."

"I was getting around to it..."

The excuse sounded lame before she collapsed across from Satsuki, elbow propped against the edge of the table. Why did she care? With Mako suddenly appearing next to her, beaming a smile that almost made her forget about the miserable day, Ryuko watched Mako's mom cook something on the stove, pieces of mystery stuff covering the counter. They hadn't seen the masked bastard since that afternoon. Even his weird presence wasn't around. Maybe he was bothering somebody else. Or maybe he went home.

But no matter what, if she ever saw his ugly face again, she was going to smash it into the ground.

"What's with him?"

She jabbed her thumb towards Gamagori, who was wearing an inconspicuous wetsuit underneath a white raincoat and matching galoshes, "You've been swimming or something?"

"We'll get to that in a minute, Ryuko."

Satsuki nodded when Sukuyo Mankanshoku brought her some tea. Immediately, she recognized the scent, a distinct lack of bitterness clinging to the steam. A local brew. One lacking Soro's ingenuity and skill. After sampling the brew, she lowered the plastic cup from her lips, "Mankanshoku explained what happened with extraordinary

detail. However, given her propensity for exaggeration, I would like to hear your version of that afternoon's events."

"There's not much to say..."

Ryuko leaned backwards, listening to the storm pound against the windows, "The guy appeared out of nowhere wearing a freaky costume. He must have been following us. I couldn't see his face, but he was a smug asshole. Like Inumuta or Jakuzure. Not to mention fast. And I mean, *really* fast. But the strange thing, Satsuki, was his clothes. A Goku Uniform could have some impressive speed, but this guy's costume didn't have Life Fibers. And there was the strange aura clinging to him..."

Satsuki's eyebrow arched, "A strange aura?"

"I don't know how to explain it. It was like there was something *wrong* with him."

The tapping of her finger against the table stopped when Mako shifted closer, "Like darkness. Or shadows. Or the opposite of Ragyo Kiryuin's weird lightshow. But he vanished into a portal before I could get answers. And I haven't seen the bastard since."

"That confirms Mankanshoku's story."

The friendly tranquility defining Mako Mankanshoku enveloped Ryuko's existence as her sister's troubled expression relaxed. But she didn't say another word. It was apparent Ryuko viewed this individual as nothing more than an annoyance. An inconvenient threat at best given his lack of involvement. Perhaps her sister had the correct approach. Perhaps the assailant harbored no ill intent. After all, if he'd wished to tempt fate, to draw Ryuko into a confrontation of his choosing, he could have easily targeted Mankanshoku.

Her mind revolted at the absurd train of thought.

This person's jurisdiction over shadow-like darkness and antagonistic behavior demonstrated otherwise.

"We haven't seen reports of anyone matching his description. He more than likely went underground following your encounter," she finished Sukuyo Mankanshoku's tea, acknowledging its inferiority to Soroi's with an appreciative nod, "Either he didn't anticipate your peculiar strength or wishes to continue his plans without further interference."

"Ain't that swell..."

A *screech* forced Gamagori to wince when Ryuko propped her foot against the table, forcing the front two legs of her chair off the floor, "You got a plan or something?"

"Not at the moment."

The light *clink* of the plastic cup meeting the table went unheard. Overwhelmed by Sukuyo Mankanshoku immediately appearing at her side, a fresh brew already prepared, "But if we wish to reverse our fortunes, we need to use what this person stated. Or rather, didn't say."

Satsuki granted herself a moment's reprieve to enjoy the tea's lackluster flavor before adding, "According to Mankanshoku, our adversary not only sounds young but was surprised that you avoided his attack. Which is interesting."

"What do you mean?"

"Until last month, this country's educational system was underneath my authority," she answered her sister's question, pausing only to get the point across, "If this individual happened to be a student, he would have known about Goku Uniforms. That he was astonished by what amounted to mundane displays of physical prowess implies ignorance, not only involving Life Fibers, but recent events as well."

"He doesn't know about Life Fibers?"

Ryuko pushed her chair back onto the floor with a loud *thud*. Not know about Life Fibers? She found that really hard to believe when everyone was almost devoured by the stuff, "Wait a second. If he doesn't know about Life Fibers, that means you already have a way to stop him, right?"

"Gamagori."

The kitchen shook when Gamagori grabbed the mysterious steel crate at his feet. As the wooden table sagged underneath the immense weight and Mako's mom continued cooking like nothing happened, Ryuko blinked, looked at Mako, who seemed oblivious, before leaning sideways, "Do I have to ask what's in the box?"

"After Aikuro brought something crucial to my attention, I began considering several contingencies."

Taking her sister's confusion at the former teacher's name in stride, Satsuki settled the trembling cup as Gamagori unlatched the transport container, "At first, it was nothing more than wishful thinking. But this masked individual's presence changed everything. I requested Gamagori's assistance with a particularly sensitive matter. Something I'm not certain you would have appreciated."

By the time Satsuki finished talking, Ryuko wasn't paying attention to her sister.

For sitting inside the box, pristine as the day they sunk into Tokyo Bay, were her dad's Scissor Blades.

"You have my deepest apologies for disturbing their resting place, Ryuko," Satsuki closed her eyes, refusing to make excuses for her despicable actions as Ryuko reached towards the familiar pair of blades, "But if our adversary is truly dangerous, we'll require every advantage possible."

"Err... yeah."

Ryuko didn't know what to think. Sure, she was a little pissed Satsuki recovered her dad's weapons without saying anything. But her sister had a point. And that worried her more than anything else. Reaching into the box, she grabbed the sword that carried her through Honnouji Academy, fingers sliding across the smooth handle. It had only been a few weeks, but it felt like forever since holding the Scissor Blade. And, for just a moment, everything fell away. The storm. Satsuki. Mako. Even that arrogant bastard. Nothing mattered as her reflection on the polished metal wavered.

"I guess that makes sense."

With an annoyed sigh, she collapsed back into the chair. What difference did it make if Satsuki found the Scissor Blades? It wasn't like she needed them in school. Even if some of the assholes in her classes deserved getting their asses kicked. Propping one foot against the table as Mako grabbed the other Scissor Blade, the same one Nui Harime carried around until losing her arms, Ryuko pointed her own sword at Satsuki.

"But do you have any way of finding this guy?"

"Our adversary can conceal his movements. However, nothing is perfect," Satsuki watched Mankanshoku's handling of the departed Grand Couturier's weapon before glaring sharply at Ryuko, "Through reverse engineering of Inumuta's Probe Regalia, we should be able to disrupt whatever camouflage he's using."

"Great..."

Ryuko groaned. Loudly and with as much emphasis as possible. Not only did she have a lot of freaking homework but waiting around for Satsuki to track down the bastard meant she couldn't waste time doing anything else, "There goes the rest of my weekend."

"Studying can wait, Ryuko!"

Dropping the Scissor Blade, Mako pivoted awkwardly, socks sliding against the off-pink linoleum tiles. As her best friend in the world grabbed the deadly weapon before it touched the ground, she slid closer to Ryuko, arms extended around the Scissor Blades, "For there's something super-duper important I have to ask!"

"Mankanshoku."

Gamagori considered his choice of words extremely carefully. Preempting Matoi's confusion, he folded his arms, using his imposing presence to speak before Mankanshoku obtained her fabled stride, "What are you implying? If there's something important Lady Satsuki should know, please get to the point."

"Um... I mean, isn't it really obvious what this guy wants?"

Ryuko stopped looking at the bang of crimson hair hanging over her left eye, "Huh?"

"We've seen tons of movies, Ryuko! Romance! Action! Comedy! Sometimes, when nobody's looking, we even sneak into the movie theater!"

Mako motioned towards her mom, who was humming quietly in the corner of the kitchen. Oblivious to her best friend's nervous chuckling about the illegal activity, she gave Gamagori a thumbs-up before clenching her shirt, "But in every action movie we've seen, the evil villain is always searching for more power! It's like their hobby or something. So, if this guy is a super evil person, he'll head to the first place guaranteed to make him stronger than anyone on the planet!"

Rain drummed against the Mankanshoku household accompanied by the crackle of thunder.

Gamagori's mouth hung open while Satsuki's brow furrowed.

"Shit!"

Ryuko leapt to her feet despite Mako's spontaneous hug, "There's no time to waste! We gotta get moving!"

"Gamagori, inform Hououmaru to return at once."

No other words were necessary. Already Gamagori was following her orders, a cell phone raised to his ear. Fingers splayed across the table, palms lying flat against the surface, Satsuki grimaced. If Mankanshoku's train of thought possessed the slightest semblance of accuracy, they needed to move quickly. But acting rashly was counterproductive. Possibly detrimental given the unknown variables. Caution was warranted. No, it was necessary to regain the advantage.

"Ryuko, you mustn't lose focus," with the sharp *clack* of her heel, she stopped Ryuko's attempt to rush outside, "For all we know, Mankanshoku's curiosity is misguided. But we shan't leave anything to chance. Once Hououmaru returns, we'll head immediately to what remains of the Kiryuin estate."

"But what the hell is he looking for?"

Ryuko wanted to curse at Satsuki. But that wouldn't help. The guy was doing who-knows-what for several days. There was no telling what he's been doing. For all they knew, he was already there, "Senketsu and me destroyed that glowing ball of yarn! There's no more Life Fibers on the freaking planet!"

"Does *he* know that?"

The anger wrapping around her sister deflated, "Our adversary was unaware of your abilities. What are the chances the Original Life Fiber's death evaded his notice as well?"

"Then what are we waiting for?"

Her grip upon the Scissor Blades tightened as she matched Satsuki's glower with a confident smirk. Following her sister out of

the kitchen, prepared to kick the bastard's ass once and for all, Ryuko abruptly stopped walking. Crap! How could she forget something *this* important? With an awkward curse-filled apology, she turned around, leaving Satsuki alone in the front hallway. Rushing back to the kitchen, Ryuko leaned into the room and grinned at Mako, "Mako! We'll be back as soon as we kick this guy's butt! Then we can finish our algebra homework, alright?"

"Sure thing, Ryuko!"

Mako hugged her best friend as hard as physically possible, "You can count on me to help beat that long division!"

"Hey! Gamagori!"

With Mako's supernatural strength squeezing her chest, Ryuko glared at the larger teenager taking up most of the free space in the kitchen, "Watch Mako until we get back. And if that guy shows up, make sure to punch him for me, got it?"

The former member of the Elite Four stood tall, his head indenting the ceiling, "You need not worry, Mato! For I, Ira Gamagori, shall ensure nothing befalls Mankanshoku! You have my word!"

She stared at Gamagori, then looked down at Mako, before nodding. The guy was embarrassing. And maybe he didn't have an indoor voice. But if he gave his word, there was nothing anyone could do to make him change his mind. Or give up. Not even Satsuki had that sort of power. Smiling at Mako, who was reluctant to let go, Ryuko raced down the hallway after Satsuki, thunder roaring overhead and the Scissor Blades clasped in her hands.

There was no time to waste.

Not if she wanted first crack at the masked bastard.

Chapter 1.7

A problem with post-canon stories is that there tends to be a lack of pictures. For instance, the Forbidden Chamber where the Original Life Fiber is shown in detail during Kill la Kill. But not afterwards. But given the description of the scene, I went with the best substitute I could find. Also, this is the first half of the scene.

And as Ryuko gets more and more annoyed, especially with someone like Vanitas, she tends to curse. A lot. That's just who she is.

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/9/99/Kill-la-kill-ryuuko.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/640?cb=20150413052859>]

"What the hell were those things?"

She took the steps three at a time, launching herself further into the darkness, Scissor Blade bouncing on her shoulder. The weird monsters infesting Ragyo Kiryuin's old house couldn't be real. But if Satsuki hadn't noticed something out of the ordinary... if Hououmaru hadn't spotted the *things* in the shadows... she'd still be upstairs, carving a path through purple and green monstrosities. Slicing the Scissor Blade left and right. She didn't know what the hell was going on, or why those creatures kept coming back no matter how many they killed, but the masked bastard had to be responsible.

And Satsuki...

Her sister purposely stayed behind. Even facing down dozens of creatures, Satsuki wasn't worried. And neither was she. Her sister was strong as hell. And with one of their dad's Scissor Blades, there wasn't anything strong enough to take her down. Which meant *she* needed to hurry. Because something wasn't right. The meteor

showers. The weird dream. And now the masked bastard. She didn't know *how*, but everything was connected.

Looking over her shoulder as a light appeared in the distance, Ryuko scoffed. None of the monsters were following her.

In fact, she was completely alone.

"The freaking bastard's waiting for me."

Without slowing down, she sprinted into the Forbidden Chamber, grimacing when the rain suddenly pelted her in the face. She remembered Satsuki telling her about this place. How it had once been filled with nothing but Life Fibers. The threads covering every surface. Literal sheets of the stuff. But without the ugly ball of yarn, there was nothing left. Nothing at all except dreary darkness and lightning briefly flashing through the massive hole in the roof.

And something else.

"What... the..."

Ryuko stood in the pouring rain, water dripping from her chin and jacket whipping in the wind. Her fingers grew cold in the frigid storm. But she didn't care. Her attention was locked on something more important. It was unbelievable. Defied common sense. And yet, she couldn't look away. It drew her forward. For in the center of the room, floating right where the Original Life Fiber once lived, was an old-fashioned keyhole. The sort of lock nobody used anymore.

Rain trickled down her face, coating the Scissor Blade in a wet sheen, as she *tried* processing what she saw. She blinked, hoping it was a mirage or hallucination, and yet the mysterious keyhole, nothing more than a crimson outline, remained. And with every step closer, her dad's weapon almost slipping from her fingers, she saw something inside the keyhole.

"Is that..."

A familiar skittering broke her trance.

They appeared from the shadows. Literally. Crawling out of the darkness and into the rain. With a grunt, she swung the Scissor Blade off her shoulder, glaring at the pure black creatures with beady yellow eyes. These things were different from the monsters getting their asses kicked by Satsuki. These guys were older. *Realer*.

"You guys again!"

She remembered now.

The shadow things from her dream. Skittering and crawling with claws reaching for their heart. These were the same monsters. Chuckling, she grinned audaciously, relaxing somewhat despite their numbers. This wasn't a big deal. If these things were just like she remembered, tearing them apart was going to be a piece of cake. Her sneakers kicked up puddles of water when she darted towards the closest shadow, running through the rain just as its eyes swiveled and antenna twitched.

And with a single swing, sliced the bastard apart, sending both halves falling to the ground.

"That's more -"

Her eyes widened when the monster immediately reformed, darkness and shadows pulling themselves together. Tensing when the creature looked at her - no, through her - as something intimate, Ryuko didn't know what to do when it suddenly ran in the opposite direction alongside its friends. The Scissor Blade sat purposeless in her fingers as she watched, unable to do anything, when the monsters disappeared into the keyhole.

And immediately she felt something *change*.

"So, you came all this way to see me."

She spun around, sneakers scraping against the ground and Scissor Blade glistening in the rain. Her eyes immediately locked on the guy standing in one of the hundreds of empty alcoves surrounding the room, arms crossed over his chest and radiating the *feeling* of smug arrogance, "I have to admit, I'm impressed. I believed my creations would make short work of you and your sister. But here you are. Without a scratch and front row tickets to the end of everything. Not too bad for a moron."

"Shut the hell up!"

"Or what?"

With a mocking snort, he leapt from the alcove, arms outstretched, before landing on the other side of the room, "You'll fight me?"

"You're damn right!"

Her hair stuck to her face as she measured the distance to the bastard. The guy was fast. She couldn't question that. But with a flick of her wrist, she spun the Scissor Blade, rain dripping from the razor-sharp edge. Speed didn't matter. She just needed an opening. One shot to take him down. Aiming the Scissor Blade at the masked bastard, she snarled, sneakers grinding against the slick stone, "So drop the act and start answering questions!"

"I've traveled quite a bit, but your weapon is, by far, the stupidest thing I've seen," he chuckled, rain dripping from his armor as he stepped forward, "You'll have more luck destroying those pathetic shadows."

"Yeah, well, fuck you too, asshole."

She smirked when the bastard stopped walking, "Throw all the monsters you want at me! Because you're shit out of luck! The Original Life Fiber's gone! That power you're looking for? It ain't here! You might as well give up and save me the trouble of kicking your ass!"

"You truly are a moron."

The girl was interesting, but her intelligence was woefully inadequate. There was a deep stain of darkness on her Heart. Something inherent. And yet, despite her boundless frustration and threats against his life, she wasn't tainted. An intriguing paradox that drew him forward, "Life Fibers? I couldn't care less about the stuff."

"What!?"

"Don't tell me you're not the least bit curious," he jabbed his thumb towards the keyhole, unconcerned when the ground briefly trembled. And once the girl's attention focused onto the darkness swirling around the entrance to her world's Heart, devouring the feeble light growing dimmer by the second, he mockingly added, "It doesn't matter what you want. Or what you think / want. You can't save this backwater world. Nothing can. Any minute now, this world and everyone on it will disappear into the darkness."

"Not if I stop you!"

"Stop me? Don't fool yourself, idiot."

He grasped the power dwelling within the farthest depths of his incomplete Heart, imprinted upon the endless loneliness defining his existence, "This pathetic world is doomed. You're just too stupid to realize it. But I'll play your silly game."

"... the hell?"

Not for the first time, Ryuko found herself wondering what the hell was happening. One second, the bastard was taunting her, and the next he summoned a sword in an explosion of purple flames. And for once, she hesitated to speak her mind. Instead of mocking the guy's stupid-looking weapon, she shifted one foot backwards, Scissor Blade held lengthwise across her body. She thought Goku Uniforms were weird. But this guy's sword took the prize. It was predominantly grey with chains wrapped around its edge. And it had a freaking

piece of a clock on the end. But it was the strange blue eye-like jewels that settled the question.

Everything about the bastard's sword was freaky and messed-up.

"What are you waiting for?"

Holding the key-like blade over his shoulder, the guy chuckled, taunting her with a single curled finger, "If you defeat me, I'll spill the beans. I'll tell you everything. Including what's happening to your world. Does that sound fair?"

"I'll make you eat those words!"

She crossed the room between flashes of lightning. Puddles splashed with every step, droplets of water hovered from the impact while the thunderstorm raging overhead intensified into a maelstrom. There was no doubt about it. This guy was insane. And dangerous. But everyone was counting on her to kick his ass.

Mako! Satsuki! Even Gamagori!

They were depending on her to *win*!

The Scissor Blade thrummed with energy, crimson light spilling from the razor-sharp edge as her Life Fibers, the same stuff Ragyo Kiryuin put into her body, momentarily synchronized with her dad's sword. With her jacket fluttering in the wind, slick fingers tightened when she covered the last few feet. Sliding along the ground, kicking up twin splashes of water, she roared at the top of her lungs before swinging downwards, intent on slicing the bastard and everything behind him into a million pieces.

Screw taking him back alive!

"Is this the best you can do?"

Faster than she expected, way faster than he moved the other day, the guy's Keyblade moved in front of the Scissor Blade. And almost

instantly, Ryuko felt her hands tremble, muscles shaking from the bastard's inhuman strength. Crap! He was a lot stronger than she thought. And this was without Life Fibers? Grunting, then snarling, when the guy chuckled, mocking her inability to follow through on her threat to kick his ass, she planted a foot against the ground, toes curled within the rain-soaked sneaker.

"I'm just getting started!"

She forced out every scrap of power in her body. Mako's smile. Satsuki telling her to go ahead without her. She remembered every word. They were counting on her! And that gave her the strength to match the masked bastard. Darkness or not, nothing would stand in her way! And slowly but surely, she made that dream reality. Even with the weird shadows surrounding his weapon, the guy's laughter faltered. Then stopped as he gripped his Keyblade with both hands, struggling against the Scissor Blade poised inches from his face.

"What's the matter, dumbass?"

Despite struggling, Ryuko grinned into the bastard's rain-streaked helmet, *imagining* his frustration, "This too much? Just say the word! Maybe I'll start pulling my punches!"

"I think I'm beginning to like you..."

The world spun, up and down inverting themselves, when the bastard swept his leg, kicking out her feet. Thinking quickly, Ryuko planting her hand onto the floor, fingers grasping for resistance upon the slick stone. The muscles in her arm coiled, Life Fibers twisting around themselves with enough energy to push her entire body several feet into the air. And then her eyes widened when the guy closed the distance before she could blink. Without bother to wonder *how* he was so freaking fast, she reflexively swung the Scissor Blade, causing the guy to scoff when his Keyblade stopped inches from her heart.

But it wasn't enough.

Part of her jacket burnt away when a firestorm of dark flames exploded from the strange weapon. Embers and sparks clung to the Scissor Blade. A miasma of shadows slammed against her chest, pulling at something deep within her heart, before the accompanying momentum shot her across the Forbidden Chamber, slamming her into the wall.

"Shit!"

Gasping for breath, blood dribbled out the side of her mouth. God damn it! How the hell did the guy create fire out of nowhere!? She didn't have a lighter or anything. Even the weird Goku Uniforms for the Cooking Club had built-in burners. But this guy didn't have anything! There had to be something she was missing.

Screw that!

Nothing about this guy made any freaking sense!

With a subdued curse, she struggled onto her feet, the pain already ebbing into a dull throb. Her mom was a heartless bitch. Nobody could argue with that. But thanks to the Life Fibers in her body, the guy's surprise attack only slowed her down.

"You're quite stubborn."

His heels left the ground and never returned. With the reflection of her snarling face warped on his rain-streaked helmet, he ascended into the air. Releasing his Keyblade, which vanished in a flash of purple flames, he floated behind the keyhole, arms folded across his chest, "What makes you special?"

She wiped the blood from her lips, "Like hell I'm telling you anything, dipshit!"

"Heh... HA! HA! HA! HA!"

As the guy reared his head back and laughed, Ryuko spit on the ground, removing the bitter taste of copper from her mouth. This settled the question. The masked bastard really was as insane as he looked. No, he was worse. He was just like Nui Harime. A psychopath. And that, more than his obnoxious behavior, solidified her resolve. No matter what it took, she was going to kick his ass.

"Laugh all you want," Ryuko glared at the guy as another earthquake shook the room, widening the cracks spreading across the walls and floors. Pointing the Scissor Blade between his eyes, rain dripped from the hardened Life Fiber sword when she shouted, loudly enough that he was forced to listen, "Because I'm not going to lose!"

"Heh... your confidence is breathtakingly honest."

She felt *something* trickle down her spine when darkness enveloped the guy. Oozing from his body. Flickering around his stupid costume like dark flames. And then *pouring* onto the ground. Flowing across the cracked floor, "And while I would love nothing more than to prove you wrong, you're just not worth the time. But let's see how you deal with something a little more your level."

"You've got to be kidding me..."

The damn thing exploded from the darkness spinning, its arms and legs tucked against its body. And it was big. Easily three times larger than Ragyo Kiryuin's COVERS. Maybe even bigger. And with the same colors. As if the guy was simply copying them. Forced to cover her eyes when the monster landed with an ear-splitting explosion of metal scrapping against itself, Ryuko cursed profusely under her breath.

A suit of armor. The bastard summoned a massive suit of fancy armor out of freaking nowhere. Great. Just great. And it even had a deadly-looking sword. Not to mention the creepy as hell symbol plastered on its chest like a logo.

"What's wrong?"

He laughed at her hesitation. Memorized how quickly her bravado faltered against his creation, "Don't tell me you're scared!"

"Like hell I am!"

With a twist of her wrists, the Scissor Blade transformed into Decapitation Mode, sending droplets of water spilling through the air. And earning, for the first time, the masked bastard's undivided attention, "Once I'm finished taking apart this piece of scrap metal, I'm coming for your ass!"

"Now that's more like it."

His creation roared, darkness coating its armor as an explosion of power dispelled the storm, "Because watching the life fade from your eyes will make this entire trip worthwhile."

Chapter 1.8

This is the end of Chapter 1. And yes, the first few lines are from the previous segment. But like I said, I split the ending into two parts. Which means, of course, that I rewrote the last few lines. Anyway, enjoy! I also think this is the first time I linked an OST into the actual story. But it fits perfectly for the scene.

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/e/ef/EP25-Preview24.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140822034228>]

"What's the matter?"

He laughed at her hesitation. Mocked how quickly her bravado faltered, "Don't tell me you're scared!"

"Like hell I am!"

Her anger reached a boiling point at the constant insults. With the Scissor Blade clasped with both hands, Ryuko snapped her wrists, transforming the weapon into Decapitation Mode and sending droplets of water spilling through the air, "Once I take down this hunk of scrap metal, I'm coming for your ass!"

"Now that's more like it!"

His creation roared at the challenge. Darkness wafted from its glistening armor as an explosion of power dispersed the surrounding rainstorm, "Because watching you die will make this entire trip worthwhile."

"Tch!"

Ryuko cursed but kept her eyes focused squarely on the massive suit of armor, prepared to move at the first sign of trouble. She wasn't an amateur. The guy wouldn't summon something this special

unless it had a trick or two up its sleeves. And considering how *arrogant* he was, she needed to be careful. But with the weird darkness coming from the keyhole increasing by the second, there wasn't time to think. Sliding one foot backwards, she licked her lips, ignoring the coppery taste of blood.

And then gasped when the monster's sword was cleaving towards her neck, faint afterimages of its body already fading.

"What the... !"

Through nothing more than instinct, she propped the Scissor Blade against her shoulder. And in the ensuing clash of metal upon metal, barely stopped the sword from cutting her head clean off her shoulders. As the ear-splitting clash ricocheted off the walls, the muscle in her arm coiled. Her knees buckled underneath the armor's strength. Her sneakers slid across the wet stone floor, multicolored sparks dancing from the trembling point of contact between their weapons. Every bone in her body tensed from the unexpected power. And as she struggled against the Unversed, pushing back with everything she had, a flicker of darkness along the edge of the massive sword caught her attention.

A flicker that rapidly evolved into a writhing maelstrom of burning shadows.

Ryuko didn't even bother *thinking* about tanking something like that.

Using one of the tricks Satsuki drilled into her skull, she reversed tactics. In fact, she threw out everything learned at Honnouji Academy. With her sneakers seeking purchase, she ran towards the armor's center of mass, Scissor Blade constantly pushing against the much larger weapon. Tucking her head inwards at the very last moment before rolling forward, Ryuko danced between the monster's feet, emerging through its legs as the flame-covered sword smashed into the ground.

"Holy crap!"

A quick glance over her shoulder ruining everything. The damn thing dented the freaking floor! Stone that, according to Satsuki, was designed by her ancestors or something to withstand the 'holy might' of the Original Life Fiber. But it was the subsequent explosion of tangible darkness against the far wall, burning *and* freezing everything in its path, that pissed her off more than anything else. What the hell!? How was that even possible? Pivoting sharply, sending up a splash of water, Ryuko glowered when the suit of armor spun around, each piece twisting independently of the others.

"Great," she spat on the ground, Scissor Blade resting within her slick fingers, "Just freaking -"

Blood gushed between her teeth when the Unversed swung its sword, the accompanying maelstrom slamming into her stomach.

"S-Shit!"

Momentarily staggering from the blow, Ryuko stomped her sneaker against the ground. With a defiant snarl, she ignored the bitter taste of copper filling her mouth. Leaking from the corner of her lips. Her fingers tightened around the Scissor Blade. The single bang of crimson hair over her left eye - the evidence of Ragyo Kiryuin's experiments - shone with radiant light as she charged the armor, hardened Life Fiber weapon slamming into its much larger sword. The combined force, her superhuman strength and its monstrous power, illuminating the Forbidden Chamber in alternating patterns of crimson and darkness.

"Interesting..."

He observed the girl's movements. Studied her headstrong and atrocious fighting style. For an insect, surviving this long was an accomplishment. But her tenacity was boring. He'd met plenty of worms capable of briefly ignoring grievous damage. No, her weapon, that incredibly stupid scissor, drew his attention. The Unversed she was fighting was powerful. Something he'd been saving for when the need arose. Its attacks were capable of cleaving through stone. Its

flames hot enough to melt flesh and taint the Hearts of anyone caught within the blast.

And yet, this pathetic insect's little toy sword was undamaged.

There wasn't a single scratch on the blade. Not from his creation, at least.

Unfolding his arms, he stared at the girl. Watch her dart back and forth around the Unversed. Avoiding its attacks with uncanny nimbleness despite having most of her organs crushed *and* getting her head smashed against the wall. But there she was, fighting like nothing happened. Without *healing magic*. And every time her scissor-like blade met his creation's own weapon, it didn't shatter. Break. Or even crack.

"Now..."

Darkness shimmered around his hand, "Let's see what else you can do."

Ryuko crouched against the wall, sneakers pressing against the rain-soaked surface as the armor released another explosion of darkness. And then tensed when another earthquake sent pieces of debris falling upon the Unversed.

What the hell was going on?

She ignored the blood trickling out of her mouth. While the hunk of scrap metal was preoccupied yanking its sword free, she glowered at the strange keyhole. Nothing about this made sense. But still, she had a bad feeling about those creepy shadows. The soothing light inside the keyhole was nearly gone. There was barely anything left. And she didn't need to be a freaking genius to understand what would happen if the damn thing was completely snuffed out.

Vaulting forward onto the ground, she spun upon the palm of her hand, fingers digging into the stone. The suit of armor was tough.

And quick. And those explosions of darkness were a real pain in the ass. But she was getting into a rhythm. The dents on the white metal proved it wasn't invincible. All she needed was a single opening. And with the scrap metal being so freaking predictable, it was only a matter of time before she sliced it apart.

"It's over!"

The instant the Unversed dropped its guard, Ryuko sprinted across the Forbidden Chamber. She didn't care if this was a trick. Even without Senketsu, she was stubborn enough to take a few punches to the chin. Leaping into the air at the last second, she swung the Scissor Blade over her shoulder, aiming to slice the damn thing apart from head to foot.

Only to curse when its chest swung open, releasing a point-blank explosion of cerulean flames directly in her face.

"Talk about pathetic."

If he had the capacity, he would feel sorry for the girl. Lowering his hand, he watched the stubborn insect vanish within the torrential flames. Was she really that stupid? Only a moron would charge headfirst against an Unversed more than a dozen times their size. But from her tenacity and the ease in which she wielded that scissor, he'd expected something a bit more interesting.

"Oh well."

Watching his creation smash its arm against the ground, undoubtedly pulverizing what remained of the pathetic somebody, he cracked his neck before looking around. Keyhole becoming devoured by darkness or not, a freshly released Heart was like bait to the shadows. Enticing them to devour it. Yet nothing happened.

And he giggled. Then chuckled. Before finally laughing.

Underneath the massive Unversed, Ryuko grimaced as she held the nonexistent monster's metal gauntlet. Everything fucking hurt. Blood trickled down her forehead, dripping onto the floor. Most of her clothes were nothing more than tatters, exposing charred skin already mostly regenerated. The pain was excruciating. Nothing she would have felt if Senketsu hadn't sacrificed himself to save her life. And with that thought in mind, she pushed through the pain, glaring at the suit of armor struggling to crush her into a fine paste.

"What's the matter?"

She threw the bastard's words back in his face before releasing the Scissor Blade and *gripping* the Unversed with both hands. Holding onto the bone-white metal hard enough that she felt the monster wince. With the agonizing pain of having her body charbroiled fading by the second, she planted her sneakers against the ground for good measure. Bending her knees and straightening her spine. As her hair whipped chaotically in the maelstrom, thunder crackling overhead, Ryuko shouted at the top of her lungs.

"That punch was freaking weak!"

And *tossed* the suit of armor over her shoulder.

As the Unversed tumbled through the air, Ryuko snapped her wrist, catching the Scissor Blade. Crouching against the ground, she sneered before launching herself after the overgrown hunk of scrap metal. With crimson light trailing from her dad's weapon as cleared the asshole, then the keyhole before finally catching the bastard, she spun around and planted her foot firmly upon its massive sword.

Her sneakers briefly slipping against the weird blade, Ryuko twitched when the suit of armor's other gauntlet appeared in the corner of her eye. Waiting until the last second, she flipped sideways, stabbing the Scissor Blade through the Unversed's left arm. Earning an ear-splitting roar of pain from the bastard. Grinning at getting *something* out of the bastard, she rushed towards its head. Slicing apart everything within reach. Turning metal into nothing but chunks of

scrap. And then, with a snarling grunt, launching herself even higher into the air.

She felt confident. Full of energy. *Determined.*

A single fang peeked from her lips as she cleared the suit of armor, Scissor Blade hefted overhead. Her fingers tightened around the handle as crimson light trailed behind the hardened Life Fiber weapon's edge. And then she fell downwards. Closing the distance between herself and the Unversed in seconds. Dancing around the desperate explosion of sapphire flames erupting from its chest.

Before retaliating by swinging the Scissor Blade as hard as she could, slicing through the suit of armor straight down the middle.

"Like I said..."

Ryuko pushed aside the constant earthquakes shaking the Forbidden Chamber when she landed, knee touching the ground and Scissor Blade held to the side. Standing back on her own feet, she pointed her dad's weapon at the masked bastard. Her body silhouetted against the purple flames consuming the suit of armor.

"Your ass is next!"

"Impressive."

His sarcastic clapping, slow enough that she *knew* he was mocking her, was freaking annoying, "You defeated my creation. I think you deserve something special. You see that keyhole?"

The rain falling into the Forbidden Chamber dropped several degrees when he lazily waved at the crimson keyhole, darkness almost surrounding it. Enveloping the mystical entranceway and engulfing the faint light. And with audible amusement, he continued speaking in the same bored tone, *daring* her to interrupt, "Every world has a Heart. Those shadows you failed to kill? They eat

Hearts. So, what do you think will happen when they devour your world's Heart?"

"You did this!"

Ryuko shouted over the thunderstorm. Snarling when droplets of water began ascending into the air, gravity individually reversing itself. The Scissor Blade trembled at his laughter. It quivered in her fingers when he folded his arms, helmet staring directly into her eyes, "Did I? I'm not the person who didn't stop those shadows. *I'm* not the one too stupid to understand what she failed to prevent."

"I'll stop you and fix everything!"

"If you're so confident, you should be trying to kill me. Not talking," he chuckled, drawing out the comment, "But it's not like that will make a difference. This world is doomed. Once those shadows entered the Keyhole, it was already over. In a few minutes, this world will disappear into the darkness. And you along with -"

He lurched forward when a Scissor Blade erupted from his sternum.

"I think not!"

Driving her heel into the base of his spine, Satsuki transformed her momentum into unbridled force. Silhouetted against a backdrop of radiant light, she slammed the masked individual into the ground, cracking than shattering the reinforced stone. Dispersing the surrounding storm. And sending a shockwave rippling across the Forbidden Chamber. As her brow furrowed into a disgusted glowered, she thrust the Scissor Blade further into his body, pushing until the handle was flush against the small of his back.

"You lowered your guard."

For good measure, she pinned his right hand against the floor with her foot. After witnessing the exotic method used to summon his

weapon, allowing him the slightest freedom would be foolish, "An amateurish mistake."

"Satsuki?"

"Forgive me, Ryuko," Satsuki noted her sister's regenerating injuries before glaring at the individual pinned underneath the Scissor Blade. Only when she was certain his breathing had stopped, that he was no longer moving, did she remove the hardened Life Fiber weapon from his corpse, "Stalling for time must have been arduous."

"Yeah..."

Ryuko didn't bother correcting her sister. Stalling for time? Like hell! She'd tried kicking the masked bastard's ass from the moment he showed his ugly mug! And then smash his face into the ground. If only because she promised herself she would. Grumbling out the side of her mouth at Satsuki's piercing glare, she wiped the blood from her lips, waiting for the pain to completely subside, "Hey, how long were you waiting?"

"Long enough to watch you make short work of something befitting the Grand Couturier's sense of aesthetics."

The pain lancing through her ribs meant little. Nothing more than a minor hindrance. Berating herself for the weakness, Satsuki spared the unmoving corpse of their adversary one final glare, lamenting whether to remove his helmet. Slaughtering her way through that veritable army of monsters, razor-sharp claws inches from her body, some moving through the ground itself, had been troublesome. Far more difficult without Junketsu's strength.

As rain trickled down her face, pooling against the underside of her chin, she stepped over the corpse. Her steps measured and precise. With the thunderstorm bathing their surroundings with endless water and wind reaching a crescendo, Satsuki turned her attention upwards. At the *thing* that shouldn't have existed underneath the Kiryuin Manor, "Did he say anything?"

"His bullshit was kind of vague."

Ryuko rubbed her neck, finding the simple admission difficult to swallow. She thought back. Tried to remember if the guy said anything important. But there was nothing other than his constant sarcasm. And with the impending sense of despair growing worse every second, she wasn't in the mood to sit around and think, "Something about hearts and shadows. It didn't make sense."

Her hair lay matted against her face as she stared at the physical darkness surrounding the keyhole, "And it doesn't matter! We need to undo whatever he did! And fast!"

"Agreed."

Satsuki nodded, "However, before anything, we'll need a closer look. To ascertain what we're dealing with. Ryuko, I want you to -"

"Heh... heh... heh... heh..."

Planting both hands on the ground, he leapt back onto his feet, the gaping hole in his chest stitching itself shut before their eyes, "Stabbing me in the back? And to think, I took you for the honorable type."

"Coming from *you*, that insult falls flat."

Without succumbing to the obvious taunt, Satsuki turned around, heel *clacking* and Scissor Blade raised overhead, "Your regeneration was unexpected. This time I shall ensure victory through more permanent means!"

"Why so tense? You should relax. I mean, if you survive what's about to happen," chuckling, he stepped backwards into the forming Corridor of Darkness, mockingly saluting Satsuki at the same time, "Later."

"Get the hell back here!"

"Ryuko!"

The ground shifted underneath their feet as her sister missed catching the masked individual by the skin of his teeth. Something was happening. The walls were collapsing. Debris was falling around their heads. Barely keeping her balance as the platform tilted, intricate stones falling into the growing abyss, Satsuki sprinted towards the door. There was no longer any point pursuing their adversary. Not when he was gone. Not when their lives were threatened. With uncharacteristic worry, she looked over her shoulder, "We need to leave! Now!"

"Right!"

Ryuko didn't hesitate in the slightest.

Running across the Forbidden Chamber towards the exit, hopping across platforms with the ground constantly collapsing underneath her feet. It was only a matter of seconds before she was safe. But then something pulsed. And an overwhelming *wrongness* filled her mind. Almost involuntarily, she stared at the keyhole, eyes widening at the absence of light. Her heart clenched when the crimson outline flickered once - then twice - before it vanished.

And then darkness exploded outwards.

"God damn it!"

Satsuki was standing outside the room, fingers reaching for her own, when the darkness slammed into her back. It should have been simple escaping. Just another few seconds. But the rest of the floor collapsed, disappearing into the abyss she was damn sure didn't exist underneath Ragyo Kiryuin's house. And she cursed. Spewing insult after insult. Using the Scissor Blade and every trick in the book to reach Satsuki. But it was like moving through water. The darkness was heavy. It was pulling her backwards. Dragging her towards the abyss.

"SATSUKI!!!"

With one final vault, she leapt towards the door. Risking everything. As lightning flashed overhead, Ryuko reached for her sister's hand, darkness rushing around her arms and legs and sticking to her clothes.

But it wasn't enough.

Her fingers barely missed Satsuki's.

Screaming at the top of her lungs, Ryuko felt herself falling into the heavy darkness. The surrounding shadows dragging her further into the abyss. And the last sight she saw, the final flicker of consciousness before everything faded to black, was Satsuki desperately trying to grab her hand.

"RYUKO!!!"

Last edited: Feb 25, 2018

Chapter 2.1

So, here's the opening of the next chapter. I'll admit, I haven't written Aqua, Terra or Eraqus in quite some time. Years in fact. But I believe I got their characterizations down. In any case, I hope you enjoy it.

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Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 2 - Goodbye Yellow Brick Road

Predawn in the Land of Departure was marked by peace and tranquility. It was a world situated perfectly between light and darkness, neither stronger than the other. As the sun broke over the eastern mountains, those privy to its secrets remained slumbering. Ignorant of the surrounding world. On one such mountain, winding up the grass, tree-marked slope dissolving into a craggy cliff, was a dirt trail. A curved path worn from age and constant use. Sparse blades of grass suck through the packed soil, forming in clumps along the edge.

And on this trail, staggering for breath as he jogged around the hundredth turn, a young man forced himself to place one foot in front of the other.

"Damn... it..."

His lungs were on fire. Every step felt worse than the last. Sweat trickled down his face, pooling underneath his chin before an unseen force pulled it towards the ground several times faster than normal, "Master Eraqus... really went... out of his way... this time..."

"Pull yourself... together... Terra," Aqua gasped between struggling gasps, "It's only... thirteen... more miles..."

With numbed disbelief, Terra watched his friend somehow pull ahead. Taking the lead despite everything. He didn't know where she was getting the energy. When Master Eraqus cast a high-level gravity spell on their bodies, he knew the morning was going to be hell. Sure, he was larger than Aqua, but this was ridiculous. Almost stumbling when his foot caught on his other ankle, he clenched his jaw, forcing himself to close the distance between them. Training or not, he couldn't allow his friend to finish first.

But when he caught up with Aqua, grinning confidently at his efforts, he winced when a low-powered fire spell singed his back.

"This is not a race, Terra!"

Keeping pace behind his students, Eraqus frowned as smoke wafted from his Keyblade, "If you have energy to compete, you have the strength to endure another lap around the castle!"

A burst of adrenaline rushed through Terra's veins, "Yes... Master Eraqus..."

Two hours later, with the sun hovering lazily over the mountains, Terra collapsed onto his hands and knees. He didn't care about the gravel digging into his palms. Nor was he worried about getting his hakama dirty. All he cared about, the only thing on his mind, was the incomprehensible relief when Master Eraqus released the spell. And he breathed in relief. It felt like a weight was removed from his shoulders. Leaving him gasping, attempting to fill his lungs with as much oxygen as possible, as his master grunted in approval.

"Very good."

Eraqus calmly walked between his exhausted pupils, assessing their lack of energy with discerning eyes. Releasing his Keyblade without a sound, he approached the center of the ancient training ground before stopping, dust rising around his boots, "You have five minutes to catch your breath. Once you're ready, we'll begin today's training."

As their master walked away, preparing whatever hellish training he had in mind, Terra rolled onto his back, groaning slightly at the effort. From where he was laying down, desperately catching his breath, the sun was still hidden behind the mountain. Giving them some relief from the sweltering heat and humidly heading their way, "Hey, Aqua?"

The blue hair teenager next to him didn't bother moving, instead basking in the cool, early morning breeze blowing across the mountains. Running a marathon before the crack of dawn was difficult. And running a marathon around the Land of Departure, on an inclined trail without the use of magic was worse. But running a marathon after Master Eraqus tripled their weight using gravity was by far the most horrible thing she'd ever endured, "Yeah?"

"How did Ven get out of this?"

"Idiot," Aqua mustered enough strength to weakly punch Terra's arm, "Keep it down. Master Eraqus can hear us, you know."

Terra winced, but not from the punch, "You're right."

On the far side of the training ground, his eyes focused on the small creek meandering down the mountainside, Eraqus listened to his students. When he announced the changes to this morning's training regimen, he had anticipated minor feedback. A marathon was nothing special. Terra, Aqua and even Ventus could accomplish the trivial feat. But with the additional weight of Gravija arresting their movements? It would have been presumptuous expected no complaints. Yet they threw themselves into training without a single complaint. Expressing nothing more than the standard back and forth bickering and showmanship.

Perhaps his concerns weren't warranted.

Maybe they truly were ready to -

A familiar, if unexpected magical pulse interrupted his thoughts.

"Yen Sid?"

As his apprentices recovered enough strength to notice the approaching sorcerer, his sky-blue robes grazing the dusty ground without the slightest blemish, Eraqus turned, arms folded behind his back, "This is quite unexpected."

"Greetings, Eraqus. It's good to see you as well," Yen Sid returned the friendly gesture, his gravelly voice underscoring wisdom befitting someone of his stature and position, "While I would prefer such amiable topics, I must speak with you concerning a matter of grave importance."

"I see..."

He recognized Yen Sid's expression. His old friend's knowledge of the stars helped keep those dedicated to defending the realm appraise of the balance between light of darkness. And so, without a second thought, he approached the erstwhile Keyblade master, marching around his students before speaking in a tone brooking no arguments, "Proceed with your training once ready. Standard spar. No magic or techniques."

Offhandedly aware of the tired nods, Eraqus followed Yen Sid out of the training grounds. For almost a minute, he walked alongside the sorcerer in silence. Brow furrowed, and mouth pulled into a grimace. With the sun blazing overhead, transforming the tranquil morning into a thick, nearly congealing humidity, he turned towards the retired master, the burden of the impending conversation weighing upon his conscious.

"You felt it as well?"

"Yes, a terrible disturbance in the balance between light and darkness," Yen Sid allowed the heavy mantle of authority to slip from his shoulders, "A world has succumbed. Falling into darkness."

"Impossible!"

Eraqus struggled contemplating such a heinous disaster. His mind rebelled at the very thought. The sheer nonsense plucked at his sensibilities, although his heart had sensed the horrible disturbance. A world falling into darkness was impossible. Incomprehensible. To accomplish such an atrocious feat meant the darkness consumed the world's heart, which was normally protected through means impenetrable to anyone other than those bearing the sacred weapons. Even the Heartless could not easily, or otherwise, discover the Keyhole.

For the creatures to gain such strength so quickly...

He stopped walking when an errant, dark thought came to mind. Standing in the middle of the path, Eraqus froze, hair rustling in the wind. Could it have been? No. Not even *he* would commit something this horrendous out of sheer curiosity. His mouth tightened, the scar tracing downwards across his right eye throbbing, "If the darkness was gaining strength, Beatrix would have mentioned it in her reports!"

"Beatrix is not one to leave out details," Yen Sid mulled the peculiarities of Eraqus's statement. His fellow master, if such a title were to still apply, tracked the Heartless with an almost fervent vigor. Her reports from the depths of the realm crucial for determining the balance between light and darkness, "And my own investigations of the Heartless concur. The creatures simply lack the numbers required to accomplish such a horrible tragedy. And yet, it happened nevertheless."

"And what of this world?"

A bird cawed overhead. A raven. It disrupted the tense silence, reducing the tension into something easily surmountable, "Do we know anything about it? Its denizens. Culture. Anything of importance?"

"That knowledge, I'm afraid, eludes me."

Yen Sid stared across the Land of Departure. No matter how often he visited, or did not, the majestic landscape always settled within his heart. Carrying a sense of beauty that his own tower lacked. A calm, peaceful balance, where light and darkness existed side-by-side, neither having advantage over the other. And in that tranquility, the former master and erstwhile sorcerer stroked his beard, "This particular world laid deep within the Realm of Light. In a region previously believed bereft of civilization. A beacon in the darkness, so to speak. One formerly unknown to our order."

The troubled guardian considered his old friend's words. No matter his emotions, he needed to consider the facts. There were dozens upon dozens of worlds. Some massive and others small. Some containing interior realms more befitting separate dimensions. Yet still connected by the heart. If this world was far enough removed from the others, there was nothing to suggest this horrible tragedy wasn't merely a precursor of things to come. The first of several unprotected worlds disappearing within an encroaching wave of darkness the other masters aren't prepared to face.

"There is something else as well."

The sorcerer frowned, his bushy eyebrow pulling together, "After confirming what happened, I sought counsel with the stars. Seeking guidance on what I must do. The stars whispered of something terrible, Eraqus. A calamity of light and darkness befell this world. A disaster unseen since the war of legend."

Eraqus stiffened, "You're not implying..."

"Not, this horrible incident was unrelated to Xehanort's past ambitions."

Yen Sid stroked his beard, not only aware of his friend's history with Xehanort, but the depths of the other master's depraved curiosity, "In any case, it would be presumptuous casting suspicion without evidence. This could very well be an isolated incident. At the moment, we don't have a clear picture of the situation. Informing the

others might raise a panic. And if you are correct Eraqus, drive the perpetrator into hiding. Thus, eluding justice."

"Still, we *must* investigate!"

Eraqus snarled, his voice momentarily cracking from the emphasis, "As we speak, the Heartless are relatively contained! Our order has ensured the creatures don't have anything more than the faintest foothold! But the destruction of a world has consequences, Yen Sid!"

"Indeed."

The sorcerer's mind raced as scenarios, terrible and tragic, came to light. It pained him, but his old friend's eagerness to defeat this unknown threat was preferable to standing aside and waiting for evidence. Sighing wearily, he clasped his hands together, mouth pursed into a grimace, "Therefore, I suggest the following two-fold approach. First, we must ensure no other worlds suffer such a horrible feat. And second, we investigate the matter. Search for evidence. Determine what, or rather who, we are dealing with. And the steps necessary to end their efforts."

"You know I cannot leave this world. My duty commands I remain here."

The anxiety plaguing his mind, the concern for the realm at large, lessened at his old friend's suggestion, "But once I return to my quarters, I'll send word to the others. And as much as it pains me to admit it..."

"Yes, Xehanort."

Yen Sid closed his eyes, "His knowledge could prove most valuable on countering this potential threat. However, given recent events, we should consider other avenues before asking for his assistance."

"Agreed," Eraqus offered the older master his hand, clasping the wrinkled fingers within his own, "If anything should come to light,

even the slightest piece of evidence, I shall inform you immediately."

"May your heart be your guiding key."

Bidding his friend and colleague farewell, Yen Sid reached into his pocket and, in a flash of purest light, vanished from the world. Holding the five-pointed, sapphire Star Shard in the palm of his hand, the erstwhile sorcerer teleported from the Land of Departure. Moving through the vast, incomprehensible darkness enveloping the space between worlds. With sparks and light dancing through his fingers, connecting with his heart, he appeared in his studies, sky-blue robes still billowing from the wind. Breathing deeply, he placed the artifact on the shelf, the weight of the situation becoming an uncomfortable burden.

No matter the cause, a world falling into darkness was an ill omen.

After several seconds, his eyes snapped. He couldn't allow emotion to cloud his judgment. Acting without considering the ramifications could have unintended consequences. Steeping his fingers, he sat down, light filtering through the shaped-windows. Before he could investigate anything, he needed to contact his former master. A task far easier said than done. For to find Merlin, one either needed to be exceptionally lucky or contact his master's *second* apprentice. Due to his studies, Merlin tended to move between worlds at random. Or seemingly at random. Responding to knowledge and intuition befitting someone of his stature.

Yet through means unknown to him, whether gifted or invented, Lulu could track their master's location with uncanny accuracy. And, if in the mood, contact Merlin.

An envious ability.

But speaking with Lulu would need to wait. For he was completely alone. His apprentice, who should have been studying in his own quarters, was nowhere to be found. A weary sigh escaped his mouth. It appeared Mickey took advantage of the opportunity afforded by his

short absence. And, hazarding an educated guess, travelled to the only world accessible from his tower without teleportation or magic.

Again.

Chapter 2.2

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/2/2b/Ryuko_arrives_at_the_academy.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20150331042224]

“Should you really be sleeping at a time like this?”

Ryuko woke with a gasp.

“Satsuki!”

Upon realizing she wasn't falling into an abyss, she breathed heavily, stiffening as the memories came rushing back. That masked guy. The weird keyhole. Satsuki. That cheap piece of scrap metal. And that strange darkness. She remembered everything. It felt so freaking real. Like she actually fought someone capable of summoning strange monsters. But the tranquility of her bedroom, the faint buzzing of insects through the open windows, calmed her nerves. And with an exhausted sigh, Ryuko collapsed back onto the bed, her head bouncing against the pillow.

A dream. It was nothing more than a bad nightmare.

Rubbing an eye, she stared at the ceiling. Damn it, what a crazy dream. The masked bastard had really pissed her off. And that suit of armor really gave her a hard time. She *remembered* the searing flames burning her skin. Making every twitch, every moment, sheer agony. But it had been nothing more than a bad dream.

“Ugh!”

The groan carried every trace of annoyance she could muster. God damn it, she hated nightmares! Rolling away from the sunlight blasting through the windows, she grabbed the pillow and held it over her face. She didn't care if it was a weekday. She was going back to sleep. And not even Mako or her mom's delicious breakfasts

would change her mind. And for what felt like an eternity, just enough to get comfortable, her efforts paid off.

But then her eyes opened.

This wasn't her freaking room.

In a flurry of tangled limbs and sheets, she sat up, the thick, wooly blanket bunching around her feet. Through months of experience, she grabbed the pillow, prepared to throw it at any perverts trying to watch her sleep. Giving her enough time to pile-drive them through the goddamn floor. But she was alone. Lying in a strangely comfortable bed with only faint voices coming through the walls.

"What the..."

Sunlight filtered through the windows to her right, carrying the scent of spring weather and the cool morning breeze. It fell along the hardwood floor in bright streaks, dust visible in the shafts of light. To her left, hanging on the wall, was a kerosene lamp, orange light flickering within the soot-covered glass. Through the window, she couldn't see anything familiar. Not a single normal-looking building. It didn't look like Tokyo, Osaka or even Kyoto. Running a hand through her hair, she tried remembering something.

But all she could remember was reaching towards Satsuki.

And then nothing.

"Shit!"

She collapsed onto the bed, cursing several times, "Where the hell am I?"

Nothing made sense. What kind of weird, messed-up place was this? There wasn't a television, radio or even a phone. And if someone was trying to keep her prisoner, they would not have left the freaking windows wide open. Someone must have found her

after she fought that masked bastard. And it couldn't be Satsuki. Because her sister would be sitting right next to the bed. And Mako would have already tackled her onto the ground.

"Alright!"

With a grunt, she swung her feet off the bed, kicking away the blankets into a misshaped pile. Thinking wasn't getting her anywhere. She needed to get back home. Satsuki, Mako and everyone were probably worried. No, scratch that. Mako was worried. Satsuki was going to shout. And then lay on the guilt for making them worry. Rubbing her neck, she grabbed her sneakers, yawning as several joints popped into place.

"Sounds like someone's working," the weird sounds coming through the window didn't bother her. She was used to construction. Someone was always building some fancy new office back home. But as she jammed her feet into the sneakers, first the right and then the left, she scratched her neck and froze.

"Huh?"

She looked at her jacket. What happened to her clothes? Last she remembered, the masked guy burned her jacket and the suit of armor destroyed the rest. Yet they were as good as the day she took them off the rack. Cleaned like someone used freaking magic. Patting down her sleeves, then her pants before finally zipping up her jacket, she stood somber in the middle of the room, visibly frowning at the weird situation.

"What the hell's going on?"

Her clothes fixing themselves didn't make sense. But that didn't matter. The sooner she left this place, the faster she could get home and hunt down that masked bastard. All she needed to do was grab the Scissor Blade and -

"Hey! Where is it!?"

She darted around the room. She looked underneath the bed, all but lifting the massive frame with one hand. She overturned the table next to the door. She went over every square inch of the room. Even looked outside the windows into the narrow alley. Nothing was overlooked. But it was gone. Her dad's weapon wasn't here. And she was *pissed*. Because if experience meant anything, *someone* stole the Scissor Blade.

And that person was going to get the living crap beaten out of them!

Her foot connected with the door, nearly knocking the thick, wooden frame off the hinges. And sure, her ankle stung, but that wasn't important. She could hear someone shouting in the next room. Huh, so this was a hotel or something. That made sense. And everything easier. Because now she had a pretty good idea who took her dad's weapon. Running full-tilt around the corner before taking the stairs two at a time, she landed downwards before glaring at the innkeeper behind the counter, his office built into a well-lit enclave.

"Where is it!?"

The innkeeper, a middle-aged man with a handle-bar mustache, looked up from his book, "Oh? You're awake? I suppose you'll be wanting your sword back."

"Uh..."

Her anger evaporated in the blink of an eye. Suddenly, she didn't know what to say. She'd been ready to threaten the bastard who stole her dad's weapon. Ready to fight tooth and nail to retrieve the Scissor Blade. The idea someone would just *hand* it back never occurred to her. So, when the innkeeper grabbed the Scissor Blade from underneath the counter, handing it back without complaining, not even once, she almost forgot to take it. Instead, she stood in the lobby, confused and feeling, for just a moment, pretty much like an inconsiderable and childish jackass.

"There you go."

The innkeeper dusted his hands, “That’s quite the interesting weapon. Never seen anything like it.”

“Yeah. Thanks. Hey, listen. I’ve got a bunch of questions,” propping the Scissor Blade against her shoulder, Ryuko leaned onto the counter. Glad for the sudden change in conversation to something else, “Can you give me directions to Tokyo?”

“Tokyo?”

Bewilderment etched itself onto the middle-aged man’s face, “Is that one of the new productions in the Theater District? I’m sorry. There’s just so many different plays going on at the same time these days. It’s hard to keep track of everything.”

“No! It’s a... ugh...”

It took considerable willpower, basically everything Satsuki drilled into her skull, not to curse at the guy, “Look! Can I just borrow your phone for a minute?”

“Phone?”

Her hopes were dashed beyond repair at the older man’s confusion, “What’s a phone?”

Ryuko collapsed onto her knees, fingers gripping the edge of the counter. She couldn’t believe this guy never heard of a phone. Everything had one! Even Mako! And that meant making sure it was shatter *and* water proof! Groaning when she remembered how weird her room was, she allowed the Scissor Blade to slip out of her fingers, allowing her to grab her hair with both hands.

“What kind of messed-up place is this!?”

For a moment, the innkeeper appeared insulted. The girl’s loud voice would undoubtedly wake the other guests, leading to several noise complaints. But after a few seconds, realization dawned in his eyes,

“Oh, you’re from another world, aren’t you? I suppose that explains how you were found.”

“Found?”

“The city guards found you lying in an alley deeper into the district,” he pointed towards the door, “They brought you here. Even paid for room and board. So, there’s nothing you need to worry about.”

“Err... thanks.”

She still had lots of really important questions. But considering everything, maybe worrying about her clothes magically repairing themselves was stupid. After all, that masked bastard was her first real fight since she and Senketsu kicked Ragyo Kiryuin’s glowing ass. And defeating that big-ass robot and Satsuki’s cheap clone didn’t count since they barely put up any fight.

“Wait. Another world?”

Her mind came to a screeching halt. Even the idea that her clothes magically repaired themselves. Everything. As another person walked down the stairs from the second floor, wearing intricately crafted crimson armor and a matching, feathered hat, she leaned onto the counter, staring the innkeeper straight in the eye, “You mean this isn’t Japan?”

“Ugh!”

With a *thump*, she banged her forehead against the wooden counter, hoping the impact would awaken her from this terrible nightmare, “Can you at least tell me how to get home?”

“Oh dear.”

The red mage paused with one hand on the door, drawn to the teenager’s predicament. Visitors from other worlds were fairly common. Thanks to the regent, this world was connected to several

others. Something previously thought impossible. Not only by wizards, sorcerers and her fellow mages, but those wielding the weapons of legend. Stroking her chin, slightly glowing green eyes narrowed when Ryuko looked in her direction, "I don't know much. But you should consider speaking with the regent."

"Who?"

"Regent Cid Fabool the Ninth," she raised a gloved finger, "If anyone can help you find your world, it would be him."

"Hey! How -"

Before she could ask anything, including how to find the guy, the strange woman departed, bidding farewell the innkeeper before walking outside. As the door closed, accompanied by the jingle of a bell, Ryuko glowered. Regent? That sounded like a special word for king. Turning back to the middle-aged man across of the counter, she slammed the palm of her hand against the wood, "Hey! How do I find this guy?"

"You'll want to head to the Grand Castle Terminal. Go outside and take a right," the beleaguered innkeeper returned to his book as Ryuko shambled onto her foot. Listening to the girl walk towards the door, he looked down, frowned, and placed several coins on the counter, "Here. Take this."

She hesitated at the guy's genuine concern, "... okay?"

"The Air Cabs are free to use, but you haven't eaten in hours. And you didn't have any Gil when the guards found you."

Gil? What the hell was Gil? Was he talking about fish or something? Flipping the coins over in her hand, she clicked them together. With a flick of her thumb, she tossed the only golden one of the bunch into the air. Catching it a moment later. There were weird letters and symbols on the coins. A large bird. Things she didn't recognize. If this was money, did that mean her cash wasn't good?

Briefly panicking at being broke in a strange world, she nevertheless forced herself to smile.

“Thanks.”

Swallowing whatever remained of her shattered pride, she pocketed the money. She hoped it was enough to get home. Because she needed to make sure Satsuki, Mako, Gamagori and everyone else were alright. Her heart raced. Worry coursed through her mind at the thought of that masked bastard doing anything to them. She was certain her sister was strong enough to kick his ass. But he was a cheating asshole. He wouldn't fight fairly. Clenching her fingers at being helpless, unable to do anything while that freak tore a path of destruction across her world, she shuffled towards the door, stopping only when something came to mind.

“Hey, if this regent guy can't help, you mind if I stay another night?”

“I don't see why not.”

The innkeeper smiled, “The wife might get angry, but getting pulled away from your world? I cannot imagine how horrible that must feel.”

“Thanks... I, uh, appreciate that.”

Halfheartedly waving over her shoulder, she walked through the door. The guy was nice. And maybe he deserved another apology. But she really didn't want to spend another night in this place. All that mattered was getting home. So, if this regent guy was really as smart as that woman said, it should be easy. She refused to consider the possibility she was stuck away from Satsuki, Mako and everyone. This little trip was nothing more than an inconvenience. That masked bastard's last laugh before she pounded his face into a bloody pulp.

But walking outside into the morning sun, her mind came to a screeching halt, “Holy...”

This world was the biggest, weirdest city she'd ever seen.

Stumbling forward, she didn't pay attention to her surroundings. This was freaking unreal. Hundreds of people were walking in the street. Some wearing the same type of super fancy clothing as that woman. Like they recently left one of those conventions Mako always talked about. The place was freaking packed. People were laughing. Talking. And shouting. But there weren't any cars. Or bicycles. And weird ships floating through the skies.

She'd thought Honnou City was strange. But this city made Satsuki's project seem like a sandcastle. Because in the center of the place was an enormous tower stretching thousands of feet into the sky. Craning her head back further, one hand held against her forehead, she watched the airships going into the castle through one of the massive gates.

And then she lurched sideways when someone bumped into her shoulder.

"Oh... err... my bad," she didn't know anything about this weird world, but manners were probably something they had in common, "I'm... sorry..."

Ryuko desperately tried not to stare. To look like a freaking idiot. In fact, she did an excellent job acting like nothing was wrong. Because the person she bumped into, the guy brushing off his arm, was a giant rat. Only it was a man. It was a giant, talking rat wearing dark blue plated armor, an ornate helmet and carrying a spear across his back. And he was staring right at her.

"No apologies are necessary," the rat-man's tail swished back and forth, his nose twitching, "I wasn't watching where I was going. Please forgive me."

"It's... uh... fine."

She walked away from the rat-man, the corner of her mouth twitching. Another world. Talking animals. Weird money. And a city that looked like something from a movie. This couldn't be real. It had to be a dream.

Staring at the ground, she turned left, placing one foot in front of the other. Alright, so maybe she *really* wasn't on Earth anymore. That was fine. She could keep her cool. Act like none of this wasn't freaking her out. Hell, she saw stranger stuff when Ragyo Kiryuin brought out those COVERS. And compared to parasitic suits, talking rats was normal.

With one hand in her jacket and the other holding the Scissor Blade against her shoulder, she sighed. Breathed deeply through her nose. And glowered. She could handle this. She just needed to find this regent guy, ask him how to get home and kick the masked bastard's ass.

Piece of cake.

Chapter 2.3

This is an interesting section to me. I've honestly never written Mickey Mouse before. And sure, I've seen how he talks and acts in Kingdom Hearts. But writing his characterization was different - and a lot more difficult - than expected. And with the additional effort of writing Mickey pre-BBS, when he was still curious, slightly mischievous and prone to slacking off from work, I had to rewrite his dialogue a few times. But, I think I did a fairly good job portraying Mickey.

“Gosh, I hope I don’t miss anything.”

As he walked out of the terminal station, Mickey waved at the guards, returning their confused nods with a cheery greeting. He really liked Lindblum. Maybe it was how the world was so full of life and energy. Or that nobody knew he was a king or apprenticed to one of the strongest sorcerers in the realm of light. He was just another visitor. Another face in the crowd of thousands mingling through the streets. A tourist taking in the sights, watching a few plays and attending the upcoming festivities.

A group of mages leaving the synthesis shop, one of them arguing with the others about getting the wrong ingredients, brought a smile to his face. Boy, he really liked Lindblum. And sure, Master Yen Sid was going to be awfully sore that he skipped studying. But as long as he didn’t get into any real trouble around Lindblum, or make a scene that drew attention to himself, he was certain things would turn out alright.

“But Master Yen Sid did leave in an awful hurry...”

Mickey’s excitement deflated. He couldn’t remember the last Yen Sid looked so worried. Sure, it was hard to tell sometimes. And maybe his master hadn’t sounded upset. But Yen Sid left the tower early in the morning for a very good reason. Which, if experience proved

anything, meant something important happened somewhere in the realm of light. Perhaps even an emergency.

He stopped in the middle of the plaza, conflicted on what to do. What if there was trouble and Yen Sid needed his help with something? It seemed odd just thinking about it, but if Yen Sid needed help, that meant things just weren't peachy. Nodding, he turned around, beginning the long trek back to the terminal station with vigor in his step. Maybe he was overthinking things. Perhaps there was nothing wrong. It wouldn't be the first time his guilt made his imagination run wild. But through all the good and bad, his heart never once led him astray.

And right now, it told him to leave Lindblum.

As for the festival?

Well, there was always next year.

"Hey, what's with the strange carrots?"

"Gysahl Pickles," a nearby merchant raised her voice, "One of Lindblum's finest delicacies."

"Weird pickles, huh?"

The girl leaned over the barrel, seemingly immune to the obnoxious smell, "They supposed to smell like gym socks?"

"The worse they smell, the better they taste," the merchant sounded amused by the girl's blunt honesty, "Here. Try one."

With noticeable hesitation, the girl took the Gysahl Pickle. She held it between her fingers, sniffing the pungent delicacy. And then, in full view of the surrounding crowd, chewed the pickled vegetable. Once. Then twice. Before swallowing, "Eh, it's alright. I've had worse."

Mickey almost walked away. Eavesdropping on someone else's conversation was rude. But the crimson weapon strapped across the

girl's back by haphazard string was fascinating. He had visited quite a few worlds. Spoken with more people than he could count. Most of whom didn't know they weren't alone. Under Yen Sid, he'd come to appreciate and understand how enormous the realm of light truly was. How one world could be very different from another. Even if they were next to each other.

But the girl's sword piqued his curiosity.

It looked like a really big scissor. Or at least, half of one. And that made everything more interesting. Made him want to know more about it. Because if she had one half, that meant the other half was lying around somewhere. A pair of swords shaped like scissors. His eyes lit up. Curiosity causing his mind to race. He tried imagining how something like her weapons would work. Did the girl fight with both blades separated? Did she used them together like an actual pair of scissors? He wasn't certain about anything. But even if there wasn't anything magical about the scissor blade, that didn't mean it wasn't special.

And he was awfully curious.

"Excuse me."

The girl turned around, half a Gysahl Pickle sticking out of her mouth, "Huh? Who're you?"

"Oh! Gosh!"

In all the excitement, he completely forgot his manners! Chuckling bashfully, Mickey extended his hand, "The name's Mickey! Pleased to meet you!"

For a few seconds, Ryuko stared at the talking mouse. With the pickle still in her mouth, she considered her options. Wondering if she should leave. The world was getting stranger by the second. But she wasn't going to give a crap about pointless stuff. So, what if he was a talking mouse? That didn't mean shit! Maybe when she woke

up at the inn. But after walking around Lindblum and getting to know some of the people, a talking mouse, rat or whatever the hell that chef thing was, she wasn't too bothered.

Rolling her shoulder, she shook the mouse's hand, "Ryuko."

"Ryuko, huh?"

Mickey pondered the name, "I've visited more than my share of worlds, Ryuko. But I've never heard a name quite like yours."

The mouse's curiosity about her name set off warning bells. And from experience, there was only one guaranteed method of leaving without drawing unwanted attention. Finishing the last Gysahl Pickle, Ryuko waved goodbye to Mickey. But several steps later, just as the directions to the Air Cab Station returned, only fuzzy and confusing, she stopped, eyes widening and heart pumping, "Hold on! You've been to other worlds!?"

"I'm guessing this is your first time visiting Lindblum?"

"... something like that," she grumbled, letting the mouse think whatever he wanted. She couldn't get too excited. Not until she was sure Mickey wasn't messing around, "So, how many worlds are there? They all like this?"

"Well, not exactly. A lot of worlds have similarities. But there are just as many differences. That's what makes each world unique."

Mickey saw something peculiar in Ryuko's eyes. Confusion and frustration. Which was an awfully strange combination. Most people from Lindblum and the connected worlds weren't exactly in the dark. Thanks to Regent Cid, they knew more about other worlds than most people. But maybe he was overthinking things. This could simply be Ryuko's first time away from her own world, "And sure, Lindblum might look overwhelming at first. And maybe it's easy to get lost. But there are just so many worlds out there!"

He crossed his arms, "Gosh, I don't think anyone's actually counted them all!"

"Uh... yeah."

The sun disappeared when an enormous airship passed overhead, causing her crimson bang to momentarily brighten, "Hey, you mind getting to the point?"

"Oh, sorry! I actually wanted to know about your sword," Mickey pointed at the Scissor Blade, "It piqued my curiosity, is all. A scissor-like sword. I've seen quite a few unique weapons. But nothing like yours. If you don't mind me asking, Ryuko, your sword wouldn't happen to be part of a set, would it?"

"You could say that."

Ryuko didn't know why Mickey found the Scissor Blade so freaking interesting. It wasn't even *that* special! Half the weapons she saw people carrying around Lindblum were hundreds of times stranger. Biting the inside of her lip, she almost scowled when something came to mind. Could he be working with the masked bastard? The asshole *did* ignore Satsuki's sneak attack. Which meant he saw the other Scissor Blade. Of course, only an idiot wouldn't come to the same conclusion. So maybe Mickey was on the level and she was just being freaking paranoid.

"Hey, if you've been to other worlds, you think you can answer something for me?"

"Hmm... there's quite a lot I could say," Mickey nodded, "But I'll do my best, Ryuko. So, what did you want to know?"

She stuck her hands into her jacket, "How do I get back to my own world?"

"You're... lost?"

“I was fighting this weird guy. There was a lot of darkness, strange creatures and then I blacked out. When I woke up, I was here,” she scoffed, the corners of her mouth curling into an impotent snarl, “Now I’m looking for Cid. Because he’s the only guy that can help me get home.”

Mickey didn’t know what to say. If he could say anything to Ryuko. He’d seen many things across the realm of light. People with an unwavering light in their hearts, even if they were a little rough around the edges. Folks who dabbled in darkness just a bit too much. And beings who sought nothing but power. Who were cruel, mean and didn’t care about consequences or hurting others. But he’d never met something forcibly separated from their world. Sure, he knew it sometimes happened by chance. A magic spell gone wrong. Or other accidents.

But if Ryuko was telling the truth, and he believed she was, then something awfully bad happened to her world.

“I’ll take you to Regent Cid!”

Ryuko blinked, “You will?”

“He’s an old friend of Master Yen Sid,” Mickey knew he needed to help Ryuko any way he could. It was simply the right thing to do. And his heart was telling him that Ryuko appearing in Lindblum and Yen Sid’s sudden departure were connected, He was sure of it, “Usually he’s busy running Lindblum. Traveling across the districts. Making sure everything working and in tip-top shape. But you’re in luck, Ryuko. Because I know exactly where he’ll be this afternoon!”

She was taken aback by Mickey’s enthusiasm, “Huh? You do?”

“He’ll be at the Festival of Champions!”

With their destination firmly in mind, Mickey began walking. And after a few awkward seconds, she slowly followed, “All the strongest, bravest and best fighters from Lindblum and the other worlds

compete for the title of 'champion.' Thousands of people attend the festival every year. And who knows? Maybe you'll find somebody from your world, Ryuko."

"... yeah, maybe."

It was hard to believe Mickey. Sure, the guy was polite and friendly. But sometimes things were too good to be true. If he was right, and Satsuki or Mako were here, they'd be busting their asses looking for her. Well... at least Satsuki would. Mako would have gotten distracted by the first Burmecian she saw. But they wouldn't watch idiots beat the living crap out of each other. As her thoughts spiraled downwards, her depression worsened. She grimaced, the corners of her mouth twisting into a frown.

But if Mickey was telling the truth, what did she have to lose? She needed to get home. And the faster she found this Cid guy, the quicker she could finish kicking that masked bastard's ass until his face was a bloody smear on the ground, "Isn't Cid like some fancy hotshot leader? What makes you think he'll talk to us?"

"You can always trust Regent Cid to have your back."

A steam-propelled air cab flew overhead as he nodded, "Whenever me and Master Yen Sid visit Lindblum, Cid's always had time to talk. I'm sure if I introduce you, and you explain what happened on your world, he'll help you, Ryuko. Because if there's anyone who knows more about inter-world travel, well, I haven't had the chance to meet them yet."

Chapter 2.4

Two Days Earlier...

"World of origin. Uh... can I just leave that blank?"

"Yes."

"Potential abilities and techniques. And connections to organized crime? That's a new one."

"The rules were updated after last year's gambling incident."

"Hmm..."

He raised the multi-page form, double-sided in extra small font, closer to his face. With the early morning sun beginning to peek over Lindblum's outer walls, he could finally read the fine print. Ugh! There were so many new rules and regulations. Who would think to use organized crime on professional and honorable fighting? It was outrageous! Mulling quietly at the thought, he rubbed his chin. Far be it from him to understand high-class vernacular, but he was fairly certain several words were random jumbles of letters and numbers, "And I just sign my name on the dotted line?"

"Uh huh," the woman across the counter strummed her fingers, boredom and exhaustion etched upon her face, "You'll also need to announce which weapon you'll be fighting with."

"Of course. That makes perfect sense. I'll just write it down and... wait... what?"

"The weapon you'll be using in the festival," she tapped the remaining empty line on the registration form, "Write it down here."

"Utter nonsense!"

As if physically struck, he staggered backwards. Pointing angrily at the increasingly aggravated woman, which inadvertently drew the attention of the bored guards standing throughout the plaza, he grumbled under his breath. Expressing his annoyance at the unexpected bump in the road, "This is a tournament of champions, is it not? Under what guidelines would any true warrior limit themselves to a single weapon!? It's practically extortion!"

"It's the rules," the attendant brushed aside the warrior's complaint, "We can't just change them simply to make *you* happy."

"You don't understand! It's the principle of the matter!"

He leaned over the counter, attempting to explain his legitimate point of view. But his words fell upon deaf ears. Purposely deaf ears. Grumbling, he scratched his chin, seeking a means to end this pointless argument over semantics. Of course, he knew the attendant had to follow the rules to the letter. Which helped ensure civic order throughout Lindblum and the other worlds didn't shatter into a million pieces. If she didn't the captain of the Lindblum Guards would discover her treachery. Not to mention his involvement and potential bribery if things got much worse.

And dealing with Basch's archaic manner of speaking this early in the morning when he had better things to do wasn't an interesting prospect.

Especially when the guy could ban him from the Festival of Champions.

"Fine! I'll limit myself to *five* weapons! But no less!"

"No."

"What? No? You can't be serious," he scratched his cheek, visibly deflating under the smaller woman's petrifying glare, "Uh... what about *three*..."

“No.”

“Now you’re just being unreasonable!”

The counter rattled when he slammed his fist upon the surface. Yet the woman remained unfazed. On the contrary, it appeared her resolve only hardened, “Why are you treating me so differently? Is it because of my boisterous personality? My flair for dramatics? Legendary reputation? Or maybe you’re one of those people envious of my fashionable attire.”

“All participants are allowed one weapon,” she raised her finger, “And *only* one.”

“Grr!”

He turned away from the attendant, unable to deal with her uncompromising behavior. It was impossible she didn’t know his reputation! He was the greatest swordsman throughout the realm of light. None were blind to his magnificent and extravagant feats of strength and cunning! He was practically a legend! Someone who evaded capture by multiple worlds. Clashed blades against those wielding the legendary weapons. This woman was simply being rude! Only one weapon? Bah! An impossible dilemma! How could he choose *one* when there were so many in his collection?

Including his newest weapon of...

“Err... no, can’t use that one.”

Maybe they didn’t know *he* was the brazen thief. But drawing unwanted attention through carelessness wouldn’t end well. If he wielded the legendary blade of Alexandria in the Festival of Champions, victory would be bitter. Such arrogance would be akin to placing a target on his back. And their bumbling mannerisms aside, the Knights of Pluto were an extraordinarily capable group of knights. Returning to Lindblum or Alexandria would be impossible. On second thought, nowhere would be safe. Because announcing that

he possessed the legendary weapon would inevitably lead Beatrix right to his doorstep.

And going mano-a-mano with one of the strongest fighters in the realm of light made him queasy.

Not because he couldn't win.

No, he hated fighting Keyblade wielders because their weapons were just so darn picky. They literally slipped through his fingers at the first opportunity.

"Alright! I'll concede to your outrageous demands!"

He tried not to stare, but he could sense the attendant's smug arrogance. But no matter how she may spin the facts, this wasn't a battle. Thus, she did not win! He was a swordsman. Not a wordsmith! There was no point in striking up conversations besides exchanging witty banter with one's mortal foe. Or insults and accusations to throw someone off their game.

"But know this! When I win the Festival of Champions, I will -"

"Complain to Regent Cid at your victory ceremony," she took the swordsman's registration. As he deflated at the interruption to his speech, she double-checked the form, making sure he hadn't left anything blank. And then, after nodding at the weapon listed at the end of the form, stamped the Seal of Lindblum on the front, "You say that every year."

"But this year will be different!"

With the guards growing edgy at his boisterous personality, he recovered the completed registration form. And then, despite his personal annoyance, bid the attendant farewell. Although she bested him with words, if he won the Festival of Champions, he could ask Regent Cid for a prize. Money. Power. Items of uncertain value.

Anything one's heart desired. But he had more noble goals. A prize in mind worth more than money.

"Yes! I know exactly what I'll ask for!"

If he bested the other warriors, he could have the mustached-man permanently change the festival's rules, "And this time, no unfortunate encounters nor coincidences shall stand in my way!"

Chapter 2.5

Writing the Shakespearean style of talking predominant in Final Fantasy XII was an interesting exercise. It's more complex and long-winded than normal conversations. And yet, gets the point across in an interesting fashion. Of course, since Basch is the only character from the game in Lindblum, I'm also enjoying writing Ryuko's reaction. Or rather, lack of a response. Because she dealt with the Acting Club back at Honnouji Academy.

"Pardon me."

It was getting *really* hard not to curse. Or punch someone in the face. Every few steps, no matter how much she tried dodging, another asshole bumped into her. Things would be a hell of a lot better if they were doing it on purpose. Because then she could kick their asses. Or, since Mickey's helping her find this Cid guy, tell them to shove their weapons where the sun doesn't shine. But the freaking stadium was so damn packed it was hard enough to move, let alone breathe.

So, when another bastard, a guy nearly four times her size and wearing bulky armor, shoved against her shoulder, she decided to do things the old-fashioned way. Without giving even the slightest warning, she smashed her elbow into his stomach, sending the guy stumbling into his friends.

Shit. It really was just like No Late Day. Only without Gamagori bragging about getting her and Mako expelled from Honnouji Academy.

"Jeez, this place is crowded."

"It's not so bad, Ryuko," Mickey walked through the crowd heedless of the growing mess Ryuko was leaving in their wake, "Sure, there are a lot of people here. But Regent Cid started the Festival of

Champions to bring Lindblum and the other worlds together. I mean, gosh, sometimes you don't know what can happen."

"Huh..."

Ryuko felt her thoughts slowly grind to a halt. That answer confused the hell out of her. Maybe it made sense to Mickey. But bringing people together by having them watch idiots kick the shit out of each other? Mako might like watching that, but it sounded stupid. She might not know how things worked in Lindblum, and she intended to not stay long enough to find out, but back home, everyone would have a big feast or something. Maybe a party.

But before she could ask Mickey what this regent guy was thinking, Ryuko quickly backpedaled, almost bumping into the mouse when he abruptly stopped. After a quick apology, and then having to brush off his own apology, she noticed they were standing in front of a large door guarded by several soldiers armed to the freaking teeth. Some of them were decked out in enough armor that Gamagori would be hard-pressed to not fall flat on his ass. And, if she wasn't seeing things, a few wearing similar clothing to the woman at the inn.

"When my men informed me of your presence, I was scarcely prepared to believe it."

One of the guards, a guy with grizzled features and a jagged scar above his left eye, stepped forth. And right off the bat, Ryuko knew he was their boss. It wasn't just the fancy talking reminding her of Satsuki. Unlike the other guards, this guy's armor was a dull, almost rusted silver. And on the front, emblazoned in bright colors, was the Lindblum crest, "For you to forego normal channels, the matter must be grave indeed."

"Sorry about the short notice, Captain Basch. But Ryuko needs to speak with Regent Cid," Mickey motioned towards Ryuko, "It's really important."

"And what say your reason?"

Basch turned his gaze upon the teenager standing behind the king. An ordinary girl. At least, upon initial observation. Merely from her posture and demeanor, he could tell she possessed neither the decorum nor temperament. She was annoyed. That much he could deduce. Perhaps she was an acquaintance of Mickey or Yen Sid? The possibilities were endless, "Do not confuse my question for rudeness. Any friend of Mickey's deserves no suspicion. But I must know. For what reason do you request an audience with the regent?"

"Mickey says Cid's the guy who opened doors or something to other worlds."

She stuck a hand into her jacket, ignoring the subtle grumble from the captain, "I was hoping he could help me get back home."

"And you are certain of this?"

He knew not of Mickey's reasoning, but the apprentice of Yen Sid was trustworthy. And despite her crass demeanor, the girl seemed honest. Suggesting no ulterior motives for wishing an audience with the regent. Nodding at the guard standing lengthwise to his right, Basch stepped forward as they unbarred the passage, "Very well. I shall bring you to the regent. But before we proceed, you must relinquish your blade."

"Why?"

"No weapons are permitted in the regent's presence," Basch took the girl's indignation without faltering, "Yen Sid himself would fare no different treatment."

"But -"

"Don't worry, Ryuko," Mickey could understand why Ryuko was reluctant to give Basch the Scissor Blade. It was her only memory of home. And if he suddenly woke up in a strange world without Minnie, Goofy or Donald, he might be a little cranky too, "You can trust Captain Basch."

Her fingers twitch. And for a moment, long enough for an awkward silence to start, she considered telling the guy to go straight to hell. But Mickey was right. Regent Cid was her ticket home. The only way she could get back to Satsuki and Mako. So, maybe this Basch guy was a hardass. And sure, he didn't like her. Fine. She could deal with the bastard. But if handing over the Scissor Blade meant getting home and *beating* the crap out of the masked bastard, she was prepared to do that with interest.

"Alright..."

Snorting out the side of her mouth, she hooked two fingers around the Scissor Blade's handle. And with a lazy twisting of her forearm, drew the hardened Life Fiber weapon fast enough that most of the guards actually stepped forward.

"Here."

She flipped the crimson blade into a reverse grip before handing it to Basch, "Don't lose it."

"You needn't worry. I shall return your sword at the first opportunity."

Although he eagerly accepted the blade, Basch found himself observing Ryuko's appearance. The scabbard haphazardly buckled across her back was fairly new. But more important in terms of things, didn't fit the sword in his hands. An amateurish mistake befitting someone unfamiliar with combat. Yet the way she drew her blade suggested expertise. Months, if not years of practice. But it was the weapon itself, resting in the palm of his hand, which drew his notice. A scissor? Such a peculiar designed appeared unpractical. Yet it same firmly within his fingers. And the curved, razor-sharp edge was whetted beyond reproach.

Whoever crafted this... scissor sword... was a synthesist of commendable ability.

“We should make haste before the quarterfinal matches conclude and the regent’s presence mandatory. Follow me.”

Without another word, he stepped through the entrance, Ryuko and Mickey walking between himself and another guard. The endless cheering of the crowd filling the stadium watching warriors from multiple worlds clash for the title of ‘champion’ didn’t concern him. His duty was focus solely upon the regent’s safety. As he led the small procession through the halls and up the staircase at the rear, passing soldiers and mages patrolling the corridors without rest, Basch paid no attention when Ryuko whistled, her focus drifting.

“Wow,” Ryuko stared at the extravagant chandelier perched above the staircase, “And I thought Satsuki’s place was fancy.”

“A strange name. One I cannot recall hearing,” Basch could not help himself but ask the question, “An acquaintance of yours? Friend, perhaps?”

“Nah, sister,” she tried relaxing. To drain the tension from her shoulders before she got a cramp. But watching somebody hold the Scissor Blade, even if she personally gave the sword to them, was *really* bothering her, “She’s really rich. Maybe the richest person back home.”

“Sister?”

As another pair of black and white mages passed to their left, Mickey looked at Ryuko, “You didn’t say anything about your sister, Ryuko.”

“I guess I kind of forgot,” she wracked her brain, confused by the question. She could swear she told Mickey about Satsuki on the Air Cab. Or was it when they were walking into the stadium? She couldn’t remember. But it really didn’t matter, “Satsuki’s rich. And maybe she acts snooty. But that’s only because she’s under a lot of pressure running Revocs. Satsuki’s not royalty like Cid. If that’s what you’re wondering. We’re not freaking princesses.”

“Regent Cid is no king.”

Basch mulled the best approach for chastising Ryuko’s unabated crassness. Ignorance towards foreign customs was acceptable to an extent. And perhaps the immense shock of finding herself trapped upon another word lowered her inhibitions. But nevertheless, there were limits to his patience, “Thus, I suggest if you address the regent, you do so with proper respect.”

“Oh... sorry. So, this Cid... err, Regent Cid... is like royalty but not actually royalty? How’s that work?”

“Regent Cid and Lady Hilda do possess several qualities befitting royalty. That much is true. Yet the regent refuses absolute power,” Basch accepted the unstated apology. An intense silence followed his answer. But not through awkwardness. A glance over his shoulder confessed Ryuko pondering the answer. And as another thunderous row of cheering reverberated through the stadium, he found his thoughts drifting crossways. And, with noticeable consternation plaguing his features, addressed Yen Sid’s apprentice.

“I cannot recall the last time you visited Lindblum unaccompanied,” he allowed the comment to linger, briefly and purposely, before adding, “Thus, I must wonder if you arrived without permission.”

Mickey nervously rubbed his neck, “Well... um... that’s actually a really funny story...”

“You need not concern yourself. Your secret remains safe.”

Perhaps drawing amusement from the foreign king’s penchant for mischief was unbecoming of a man his position. If anyone under his watch attempted the same, he’d reprimand them in a heartbeat. Yet it wasn’t every day one managed to gain advantage over Yen Sid’s apprentice, “Considering the seriousness of Ryuko’s situation, I’m certain the regent will explain the extraneous circumstances to Yen Sid.”

“Gosh,” Mickey smiled at the captain, “That’s awfully nice of you.”

“Think not of it.”

Basch nodded once more before stopping. Having reached their destination, several floors above the ground, beyond the reach of any rambunctious civilians, the regent’s balcony was protected by more than a dozen of his finest men and women. Each of whom would lay down their lives. Raising three fingers lengthwise at the guards stationed around the magically barred door, he waited as the red mage carefully removed the sigils preventing entry before pivoting, brow furrowing into a frown.

“Wait here. I shall inform the regent of your request.”

Once the captain left, Ryuko stretched her shoulders and yawned. The sound carrying through the hall. Without Basch constantly breathing down her neck, she could finally appreciate how expensive everything looked. When Satsuki showed her pictures of Ragyo Kiryuin’s mansion before the Original Life Fiber blew it into splinters, she’d wondered why their mom had no taste. Gaudy statues. Fancy paintings that looked like scribbles Mako could draw? Millions of dollars’ worth of pointless, boring crap.

At least Regent Cid seemed to have some style.

“So,” she stared at her warped reflection in a suit of armor, causing one of the guards to politely command that she not touch the antique, “You keep talking about this Yen Sid Guy. He that important?”

“Yen Sid’s one of the greatest and wisest sorcerers in the realm of light,” Mickey folded his arms. Gee, it was funny. Since everybody already knew about Yen Sid, he’d never actually been asked that question. And, for just a moment, forgot what he was going to say, “Everybody trusts him. He’s the kind of person you know will go out of his way to make sure things turn out alright.”

Ryuko leaned backwards, processed when Mickey said, and then smirked.

This Yen Sid guy was some sort of powerful magician. But instead of cheap parlor tricks and fake illusions, he actually used magic. Maybe she should stick around a few days and learn some spells before going home. Because if the masked bastard was slinking through the shadows, hearing his reaction when she lobbed fireballs in his general direction would be worth the wait. Magic would have made *everything* easier back at Honnouji Academy. Dealing with Nui Harime's lack of personal space? Her bitch of a mom's disgusting depravity?

Throwing lightning would have made everything simpler for her and Senketsu.

"Mickey! It's been quite some time!"

The unfamiliar voice caused her to blink, ruining the image of freezing Nui Harime solid before shattering the psychopathic bitch with her fist. As Basch returned, flanked on both sides by guards, bringing to mind everyone at Honnouji Academy whenever Satsuki strutted through the halls, Ryuko turned around. So, this was the bigshot regent? Jabbing her hands into her jacket, she watched the regent, who was wearing a long red cape, fancy, rich-guy clothes and one freaky-big mustache, shake Mickey's hand.

"How's Yen Sid these days?"

"He's doing swell!"

"Send him my regards," with the necessary introductory pleasantries finished, Cid coughed, clearing his throat for the actually important matter, "You must be Ryuko. Am I pronouncing that correctly?"

"Uh... yeah, Cid... err, Regent Cid."

“Captain Basch explained your terrible situation,” intense and deafening cheers pierced through the walls. Yet he paid no attention to the merriment pervading Lindblum, “You’ve been separated from your world. Not necessarily an unsolvable problem.”

“So, you’re saying you can help get me home!?”

Cid stroked his mustache at Ryuko’s sudden burst of excitement and hope, “Why don’t you start at the beginning? Walk me through step-by-step what happened. The more information you can provide, the easier it will be helping you get back to your own world.”

It took a few seconds for her mind to catch up. She licked her lips, mouths slightly open. It was shocking. She didn’t expect Cid to get straight to the point. In fact, even speaking to the guy seemed really odd. Everything was happening so fast. Before running into Mickey, she thought finding Cid would be freaking hard. That it would take days. Maybe weeks. She’d need to get a job or something. But here she was, standing in front of the guy. And he was willing to help her get back home with no questions asked. It was unbelievable. And suspicious as hell.

If she wasn’t currently stranded on another freaking planet and surrounded by people throwing magic around like nothing, she’d think Cid was up to something.

And even if he was, she didn’t have any other choice. He was her *only* ticket home.

“At the beginning?”

She repeated the question a second time, just to make sure that’s what Cid wanted. And when the guy nodded, her brow furrowed into a glower at the *vivid* memories, “I guess, I don’t know, everything went sideways and messed up after that masked guy appeared.”

Aware that Basch was paying rapt attention, Cid raised his hand, silencing the captain, “A masked individual, you say? Can you

describe him?”

“I never saw his face. He was always wearing this weird suit and helmet,” Ryuko glanced away, cursing underneath her breath. It wasn’t like the guy told them his name or what he was planning. Every other word that left his mouth was enigmatic bullshit or annoying insults that *still* pissed her off, “And he had strange powers. Before I could smash his frustrating face into the ground, he disappeared into this swirling shadow vortex.”

“A corridor of darkness?”

Basch stepped forth, sharing Mickey’s expression of bewildered concern, “Are you certain of this?”

“Why would I make it up?”

Ryuko retreated just enough to not smell Basch’s breath. Crap, the guy could use a mint. And didn’t anyone in this world know about toothbrushes? With another snort, she crossed her arms, meeting the captain’s petrifying glare. Why did it matter if the masked bastard could use a portal... corridor... of darkness? It didn’t change anything, “Besides, that was only the first time. Later, me and Satsuki thought the guy was going after something. But when we tracked him down, there were hundreds of weird, messed-up monsters waiting for us.”

“Weird monsters?”

“And if that wasn’t bad enough, it turns out he made them,” she raised her voice, growing angrier with every word, and missing Mickey’s growing worry, “Because when we confronted the guy, he summoned a giant suit of freaking armor!”

“Our worst fears have been made manifest,” Basch could not conceal the hint of veiled urgency.

Mickey was concerned. He was really worried about Ryuko. Were the creatures this masked guy summoned Heartless? He didn't know. Sure, he'd never seen Heartless besides pictures inside books at Yen Sid's tower. They simply weren't that common in the realm of light. But for someone to have enough darkness to control them, if only a little. Something like that was really bad, "Regent Cid, do you think this guy... the one Ryuko fought... might be working with the Heartless?"

"Alexandria has reported strange creatures keeping to the shadows," Basch mulled over the specifics, addressing Mickey's question for the regent, "Scattered confrontations with similar monsters, no more than two or three at once, have filtrated from Burmecia and the other worlds. Heartless or not, I cannot say. But for the time being, no reported casualties have reached my ears."

"Hold on!"

Ryuko latched onto the only piece of useful information, "You're saying this guy might be here? *Could* be here right now!?"

"A troubling assumption."

Worry etched itself upon Basch's heart. Despite her unwarranted anger with the regent, the underlying truth pervading Ryuko's questions could not be ignored. The creatures were first sighted two months prior, before she encountered them upon her world. If this individual were summoning these monsters, Heartless or not, there was an ill feeling of discontent within his mind, "Yet, for the moment, let us focus upon other matters. What happened after you fought these creatures?"

"When I finally found the guy, there was something else there. Right in the middle of the room was a keyhole. One of those old-fashioned ones."

Her jaw clenched as painful memories resurfaced. The pouring rain trickling down her back. Creatures darting through the shadows. And

that feeling of wrongness, “Then these other weird monsters appeared. Pure black with yellow eyes or something like that. The Scissor Blade couldn’t kill them. But they weren’t after me. Without slowing down, they ran straight into the keyhole.”

“A... keyhole?”

“Then the bastard introduced himself. He started taunting me about everything falling into darkness,” she gave no shits about cursing. Because at this point, getting the weight of what happened off her chest was the only thing that mattered. Even Mickey’s question only managed to slow her down for a few seconds, “I tried kicking his ass. But he had this strange key blade. The damn thing was freaking tough. The Scissor Blade didn’t even scratch it!”

She took a shuddering breath. Curled her hands into fists. Attempted to get her anger under control. Being pissed at the masked bastard was one thing, but Mickey, Cid and even Basch had nothing to do with what happened, “Then he summoned the suit of armor. And after I finished kicked its rusted butt, shrugged off Satsuki stabbing him through the heart. Nobody should have survived that. But the guy got up like it was nothing and ran away right before the keyhole vanished and everything went to hell. I tried getting out, but I fell into some kind of weird darkness and woke up here.”

The silence was deafening.

In fact, Ryuko could hear her own heartbeat.

And that meant somebody *knew* something.

“You guys know something, don’t you!?”

Mickey could understand why Ryuko was getting angry. But it wasn’t just him remaining silent. Regent Cid and Captain Basch were also refusing to speak. They didn’t bother looking at Ryuko. Even the other guards were depressed. Because the implications of what Ryuko said... every word she spoke... well, they were terrible. More

horrible than anything he could remember. And yet, someone needed to give her an answer. To have the courage and strength of heart to tell her the honest truth. But something bothered him, “Ryuko, are you certain this guy had a Keyblade? I mean, there are lots of strange weapons out there. Like your Scissor Blade. Maybe he just used something that looked similar to a key?”

“Maybe? Yes! Damn, I don’t know,” she seethed, gripping her forehead, “But he summoned it like those freaky monsters! Out of nowhere like magic!”

“Oh...”

As Mickey’s ears drooped, his cheerful and positive demeanor wilting underneath the horrible truth, Cid remained resolute. This was a tragedy. There was no questioning that somber fact. The events Ryuko described bore the trademarks of one particular conversation he had with Yen Sid. A discussion on darkness and those tainted by its power. Something theoretical at the time. But he did not doubt Ryuko was telling the truth. Her anger and frustration were too honest to be faked.

Which made his next words infinitely more burdensome to speak.

“I’m afraid it’s impossible getting you home, Ryuko,” he stood firm when her attention *snapped* to him, “From your story, in all likelihood, your world is already gone.”

“Gone!? What the hell do you mean gone!?”

“What you saw... that keyhole... was the gateway leading to your world’s heart,” Mickey answered as honestly as he could. But that didn’t make things better. And yet, it was something he needed to do, “Normally, it’s protected so the Heartless cannot find it. But if they do, things get awfully bad. If they find the keyhole and consume the heart hiding inside, the world and everyone on it will fade from existence.”

Ryuko turned on Mickey, shouting with barely controlled frustration, "You knew this whole time!?"

"When you told me what happened, I thought you were somehow teleported to Lindblum by accident. I honestly thought Regent Cid could help you get home," he looked away, ashamed of himself, "If you'd mentioned anything about someone wielding a Keyblade, I'd -"

"You know this guy!?"

"No!"

Mickey gestured wildly, shocked by the accusation, "Keyblades aren't something used to bully people around! They're meant to protect worlds! To help connect hearts and bring people together!"

"And why should I trust you!?"

Her self-control shattered into thousands of pieces as she snarled at the mouse, "You knew about his Keyblade! You said Cid could get me home! But what's the fucking point if there's nothing left!?"

"Enough!"

Basch interjected himself between Ryuko and Mickey, ending the former's tirade before it further escalated, "Blaming others won't achieve purpose. It is apparent you seek vengeance on this man. But you must first accept the truth. Your world is likely gone. Yet all is not lost. You, yourself, stand here in Lindblum. Alive and unharmed. Through coincidence or quirk of fate, you escaped your world. If that's indeed what transpired, do you not believe your sister or friends weren't transported similarly?"

"Captain Basch is right."

The tension broke alongside Ryuko's lessening temper. The loss of a single world to darkness was an event that would ripple across the realm of light. And he, as regent and ruler over Lindblum, needed to

prepare for the consequences to come, “You can be angry. But you shouldn’t give up hope. Your friends could be looking for you at this very moment. And while it cannot undo what happened, I will send missives to the other worlds. Asking that they look for anyone claiming to be from another world.”

“And I’ll tell Master Yen Sid everything!”

It wasn’t his fault, but Mickey still felt guilty. Maybe he couldn’t have done anything. Maybe even if he’d known in advance the guy would attack Ryuko’s world, nothing would have changed. But as Master Yen Sid said, dwelling on the past never helped. Which meant he couldn’t keep sulking and blaming himself. Not if he wanted to stop this guy from destroying other worlds, “That this person would use the Keyblade to spread darkness... it’s pure evil. That’s what it is. You have my word, Ryuko, that Master Yen Sid will make sure he’s brought to justice.”

“I...”

Ryuko tried speaking. But nothing came out. She wanted to be angry. *Was* angry. But she knew, more than anyone else in the room, that it wouldn’t solve anything. The only person to blame was the masked bastard. And without help, finding him would be freaking impossible. If she yelled at Cid, he wasn’t going to help her. So, with a trembling shudder, she released her pent-up frustration, “... sorry. And... thanks. For helping me, I mean.”

“The guard will need to be raised.”

Basch stood at attention, remaining resolute despite the circumstances, “If Ryuko’s telling the truth, these creatures were personally summoned by this criminal. Thus, one must conclude he’s attempting to replicate his efforts. We cannot afford to wait for him to make the first move. That advantage has already been lost.”

“Have Artania spread word to the other worlds. But tell him to be discreet,” Cid cupped his chin, “There’s no reason to create panic.

Or admit we're aware of this villain's plan."

"As you wish, Sire."

Pressing an arm against his chest, Basch nodded while Cid clapped his hands together and turned toward Ryuko, "Now then, do you have someplace to stay?"

Ryuko blinked at the question, "I have a room at this inn. That not good enough?"

"I'll have my staff prepare a room for you at the castle," Cid interjected without hesitation, "In the meantime, why don't you try relaxing. I'm certain you'll enjoy watching -"

Years of training afforded Basch the necessary reflexes when loud gasps and muttering filtered through the stadium.

With but a single nod, three men surrounded the regent. Preventing danger both physical and magical. Once he was certain Regent Cid was secured and no threats were in the immediate area, Basch hurried through the doors, rushing onto the balcony with haste. His footsteps echoed upon the stone. For while he did not know the source of the crowd's reaction, his duty as captain of the guards required undeserving suspicion, even if the cause was naught but dishonorable combat by one of the festival participants. But what he saw upon the field threw away any doubt. Rendering his mind with a single conclusion.

Pushing off the banister, he rushed through the doors, his armor *clanking* with every step, "We must take the regent to safety!"

"What's going on?"

When the captain ignored her question, Ryuko's mouth twitched. Usually she didn't give a crap about manners. And now was one of those times. She might have known Basch for less than twenty minutes, but something outside spooked him. And if the asshole was

scared, then shit was about to go down. So, without bothering to wait, she physically cleared herself a path through the guards, grabbing the Scissor Blade from Basch in the process. And then, after quickly apologizing over her shoulder, sprinted through the doors onto the balcony.

Mickey hot on her heels.

Last edited: Mar 11, 2018

Chapter 2.6

I am content with everything I wrote here. Which is why it took so long to write. Still, writing new characters is always a pain. I have to watch videos, read quotes and make sure I'm not butchering their characterization.

“Swirling strike!”

Lani skated backwards, stumbling over her own feet against the much larger swordsman. Ducking and weaving around the naginata, she did her best to ignore his constant taunts. Her heels dug into the packed soil as she vaulted out of his range, one hand planted into the dirt and the other grasping her oversized bardiche. Landing on her feet when his weapon struck the ground with a deafening *thump* - and then got stuck - she grinned. Finally, this was her chance! After everything that happened, the humiliation and embarrassment, she could fulfill her revenge for what happened last -

A green feather floated across her vision.

“You goddamn...”

Suddenly, nothing else mattered. While the arrogant bastard struggled freeing his naginata, she reached up, gingerly touching the damaged headdress. How *dare* he! Seething from rage and incomprehensible anger, she pivoted, sliding one foot outwards and the other into an inward stomp. With both hands gripping her oversized bardiche, she reared backwards before slamming the weapon against the ground, lightning sparking along the massive edge.

“Thundaga!”

To Gilgamesh, avoiding the shocking magical attack was the easiest trick in the book. He simply needed to move out of harm's way. But

even so, as he backpedaled beyond the lightning encircling his previous location, Gilgamesh felt a strange tingle down his spine. And then, noticed Lani's malicious grin promising boundless pain and suffer. Which convinced him to continue running, bolts of lightning constantly exploding from the otherwise clear sky.

Oh? This was new. Last year, she couldn't use such devastating magic without keeling over from exhaustion. A chief reason for his victory in the elimination round! Yet now she wasn't winded. Chortling at his good luck and boundless fortune, Gilgamesh abruptly pivoted, shifting directions towards Lani and avoiding her latest attempt at execution via electrocution.

"Muhaha!"

With naginata safely in hand and his adversary forced to catch her breath, he launched himself skyward, arms spread outward and knees tucked against his chest.

"Your petulant glare means nothing to me, the great Gilgamesh!"

A metallic *ting* echoed across the battlefield, sending the crowd into deafening cheers. His naginata struggled against Lani's bardiche. Both weapons quivered. And yet he, out of noble intent, allowed the smaller bounty hunter to gain the physical advantage. A most worthy finale for their long-awaited rematch.

"I applaud you for not giving up!"

Leaping backwards, he avoided the bardiche attempting to give him a dangerously close shave. With one pair of hands planted against the ground, he shifted his center of mass, moving out of subsequent harm until finally landing on his feet, naginata poised overhead, "Unfortunately, you are unfit to be my chosen rival, Lani!"

"Then I suppose the position remains available?"

His witty banter, meant to end the battle, was cut short when someone emerged from a vortex of darkness, stepping onto the field between himself and Lani. Halting his advance as the crowd grew confused by the unexpected interruption, Gilgamesh furrowed his brow. Confusion and bewilderment etched upon his face. A man? Yes, it was a man. That much he was certain. Or maybe a deep-voiced woman? He'd certainly met women fitting that description. It wasn't impossible. But thanks to the form-fitting black coat concealing every square inch of the man's body, that prospect was eliminated.

So... what was this?

A last-minute substitution in the festival roster?

Wait a second. Was he supposed to have a partner?

That dastardly registration form never mentioned two-on-two team battles!

He muttered under his breath at the notion. Nobody mentioned changes to the Festival of Champions! The rules were immutable. At least, that was the rule. And changes the rules was the reason he was fighting to his heart's content! But even if there were, in fact, unstated changes to the festival, the regent wasn't the sort of man to condone darkness. Cid was far too noble for such a thing! And this unexpected interloper practically reeked of darkness. That was not a good sign. Not to mention the guy appeared in a corridor of darkness, which wasn't that different from his own ability to travel between worlds.

So, if this guy wasn't part of the festival, that left only one possible answer.

"How dare you cheat!"

When Gilgamesh brandished his naginata while shouting incoherently, Lani forgot about the man standing between them. She

gnashed her teeth. Bardiche trembling as the memory of her damaged headdress returned, "Cheating? You're the coward here, Gilgamesh! Besides, if I wanted to cheat, I wouldn't do it with so many witnesses!"

While the crowd, bounty hunter and swordsman pondered his presence, the man turned his gaze towards the balcony above the field. Even from here, he could sense the magic guarding the structure. Not even his talents could penetrate such ancient defenses without assistance. But to his surprise, the regent wasn't present. No, the leader of Lindblum was long gone for reasons unknown. And in his place, leaning upon the railing with an expression of utmost shock and bewilderment, was the captain of the Lindblum guards.

Basch fon Ronsenburg.

"My sincerest apologies..."

He sauntered across the field, feet placing themselves one in front of the other. Now this was disappointing. He'd been assured the regent would attend the festival. That Cid Fabool the Ninth would announce every match, much to everyone's adulation. And yet, that was not to be. Still, when the captain of the Lindblum guard retreated as quickly as he arrived, he found himself strangely ambivalent. After waiting ages for this reunion, a few more minutes wouldn't kill anyone.

But his patience did have its limits.

"But I've been out of town for quite a long time. Ages in fact. And, as is proper custom, wish to rest my weary feet."

With a nostalgic sigh, he clapped his hands, the dark gloves making a dull *thump* as he turned toward Gilgamesh, interrupting the swordsman's argument, "Yet I understand how much this... Festival of Champions... means to you, the people of Lindblum. Thus, allow me to make the following offer."

His boot stomped against the ground, sending out a rippling wave of dust, "Bring me Regent Cid Fabool the Ninth! Do this one, small task and you have my word that not a single heart will suffer a most... *undeserving*... fate."

"... shit."

Lani cursed under her breath. Sweat trickled down her face. Her legs and arms felt like cramping. She wasn't the most noble person in Lindblum. Hell, she wasn't even from this world to begin with! And maybe her work experience wavered between walking free and going to prison. Or possibly worse. But this cloaked guy was different. Licking her lips, she tightened her grip on the bardiche. Without a sound, she cautiously moved her feet. First one step. And then another. Eyes never leaving the man.

Not even when he threatened to kill everyone in the stadium.

She was a bounty hunter. A mercenary. If someone paid her enough Gil, she'd put some serious effort into taking down a Keyblade master. But this guy? There wasn't enough money to change her money. Gilgamesh might be crazy enough to consider fighting someone radiating so much darkness. Whose presence sent shivers down her spine. But unlike the swordsman itching to test his skills, she wasn't suicidal.

"Humph!"

Gilgamesh paid little attention to Lani's incessant whining. Or when she fled through the nearest exit with her metaphorical tail between her legs. Bah! Who retreated from battle before attacking? Sure, anyone and their parents could smell the darkness defining this mysterious man's existence. But this was simply terrible manners. However, one thing remained certain to him. This was no longer the Festival of Champions. Thus, the dozens of boring and discriminating rules were no longer in effect. He could *finally* fight to his heart's content without worrying about Captain Basch critiquing his unique and self-taught combat style.

“You should consider yourself lucky to face me!”

With minimal expositor banter, he stomped a boot against the ground. This interloper's untimely appearance in the quarterfinals likely canceled the festival. Meaning there was little or no chance the regent would bestow upon him the grand prize when he stood tall and proud, champion of this year's festival. Grumbling as his hopes were dashed for the second time in two years, Gilgamesh huffed. “For you're the one challenging a living legend!”

“A living legend, you say?”

The man graciously opened his arms, inviting Gilgamesh to attack. And in the subsequent moment when the swordsman rushed forward, naginata poised to lethally skewer his heart on its bladed edge, spun lazily around the powerful strike. Allowing the ‘living legend’ to continue on his journey unabated.

“And you might you be, I wonder.”

Paying scant attention to the boisterous swordsman attempting to recover his balance, he gazed upon the balcony once more. Despite his magnanimous offer to spare the people of this world, the regent still wasn't present. But in the man's location, one standing at the side and the other leaning over the banister, were two individuals. A mouse. And a girl. An otherwise ordinary girl wearing strange clothing. Her expression one of anger. And gripped in her hand, its coloration a brilliant crimson, a weapon of most peculiar design.

“Excuse me! You! In the balcony! If you don't mind, could one of you kindly fetch our dearest regent?”

His voice reached their ears despite the screaming crowd. Looking around, from the thousands of people fleeing the stadium to the two individuals standing where the regent was meant to be seated, he cupped a hand against his mouth, “I've been waiting for this day for such a long time. It would be most *unwise* for him to miss our long overdue reunion.”

“Who are you?”

Ryuko’s breath hitched. Not from anger or frustration, but genuine surprise. Despite knowing that taking her eyes off the cloaked bastard was a terrible idea, she swallowed the lump in her throat and stared at Mickey. The seriousness through her through a loop. This was Mickey? This was the guy who offered to get her home? Who, even though she acted like a total bitch in front of everybody, accepted her apology with no questions asked? She couldn’t believe it. But the look in Mickey’s eyes when he jumped onto the banister, balanced perfectly despite his large shoes, caused her heart to skip a beat.

It was the same anger as *Satsuki*.

“Just a man of no consequence.”

The soft *thudding* of his boots against the packed dirt as he strutted closer to the balcony confessed his reaction. He wasn’t interested in the mouse. Not in the slightest. Of course, there was an ‘air’ of righteousness in the mouse’s heart. A blinding light that depressed darkness. Yet, he waved one hand before his face, fingers dancing back and forth like wisps upon the wind, “As for the other question undoubtedly waiting to be asked, I’m afraid that’s a rather personal matter. Something between myself and the regent. I’m sure you, of all beings, can understand my hesitation in divulging such sensitive information.”

“Freaking smartass!”

Teeth bared into a snarl, Ryuko leaned over the banister, “You with that masked bastard!?”

“A masked bastard?”

He could not help but find such vulgarity interesting. Very interesting, indeed. And quite unbecoming of a young woman. And yet, in any case, not his immediate concern. Still, she did ask a question and,

with perhaps a bit more flair than necessary, returned an answer, "Sorry, don't quite ring a bell. You'll have to be more specific."

The *arrogance* caused Ryuko's eyebrow to sporadically twitch, "You son of a..."

"No, no, no, this isn't working!"

With an extravagant flick of his wrist, Gilgamesh threw the razor-sharp and semi-legendary naginata over his shoulder, allowing the bladed weapon to stab itself into the nearest stadium wall. And getting the interloper's attention. Just as predicted, "Following rules is just too boring! It doesn't even feel like I'm fighting!"

Stomping his boot against the ground, he scoffed when an intricate sigil momentarily formed. Hand-drawn over the course of many hours. And braced himself as, in a flash of light and ear-splitting *shing* of metal upon metal, six blades erupted from the ground. Including the legendary weapon, and royal treasure, of Alexandria. Grasping each sword, weapon or bladed equipment in each of his six hands, Gilgamesh settled into a familiar, and extremely comfortable, stance.

"But real combat, yes, that's more my style!"

His muscles coiled and breathing hastened. A bead of sweat ran down his face, pooling against the underside of his chin. And with an arrogant grunt, more to calm his rampaging nerves than scare the dangerous man waiting his next move, Gilgamesh rushed across the battlefield. Even if cloaked interloper was created within darkness to steal hearts, to drag the worlds into darkness itself, he wouldn't back down. For he was the great Gilgamesh! One of the strongest and most powerful swordsmen in the realm of light! He closed the distance between himself and the man in a fraction of a second, his massive frame concealing lightning-fast reflexes and speed unmatched by those unfamiliar with magic.

The sun itself influenced his efforts, shining from over the stadium wall to his back, blinding the dastardly villain only feet away.

And yet, his attack, multiple swords slicing from several angles, was countered by an ethereal blade that didn't exist moment's prior. The crimson-tinted broadsword positively oozing darkness stopped one of his better techniques. But he wasn't daunted! Not in the slightest. Not even at the man's ominous chuckle or the fact his arm was barely quivering. Without any hesitation, he stepped backwards, regained his footing, and lashed out.

Striking over and over again.

But it wasn't enough.

Despite leaping across the battlefield at speeds most beings would find dizzying, he couldn't break through the guy's defenses. He tried everything. All the tricks in the book. But with his single broadsword, the cloaked interloper countered and parried all six of his blades. His single arm moving faster than his half a dozen.

And the incessant *commentary*.

Curses! It was time for an innovative approach!

"Think fast!"

His heel sliced through the air, carving towards the man's center of gravity. Maybe it was unsportsmanlike to use one's feet in a sword fight. But pragmatism beat honor any day of the week. Especially when the former meant victory.

But the villain disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Pivoting sharply to recover his balance, Gilgamesh spun around, weapons ringing his body. What happened? Had he been fighting an illusion this whole time? Did the interloper create a magical double when his back was turned? No, that was impossible. He was certain

he kicked the guy. Hmm... at the very least, he was fairly confident his boot connected against the thin, yet strangely alluring, black fabric. Yet, he was standing in the middle of the battlefield with only the faint shouting of the fleeing crowd for comfort.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, my boisterous friend...”

He caught the stench of darkness before a hand pressed against his back, “... but you’re keeping me from my long-awaited -”

The metallic *hum* of sharpened metal interrupted his serenading of the swordsman’s subpar performance. Without nary a sound, he leapt to the side, avoiding the crimson blade aiming to remove his head. Darkness wafted from his arm in turbulent streams. Purple-tinted fire and solidified hatred accompanying his own disdain at the unwanted intrusion. Anger bubbled beneath his flesh, tainting unseen skin putrid shades of alabaster. And so, he was caught off-guard when the girl twisted beyond what was humanly possible. His eyes widening slightly as her sneaker slammed into the underside of his chin, sending him careening backwards across the field.

Yet, he felt not an ounce of pain.

Such unfiltered rage. The unquenched *thirst* for revenge. Oh, he could sense those things. But for some peculiar and odd reason, the darkness hadn’t dragged the girl into the bitter and cold abyss.

“You... saved my life?”

Ryuko barely glanced at Gilgamesh, “Wasn’t aiming for ya!”

Alright, now things were coming together. When she and Mickey ran outside, she’d thought the guy’s black coat looked really familiar. But from so high up in the stands, it was really hard to tell. But now she was goddamn certain about a lot of things. It was the exact same outfit as the enigmatic guy from her weird and messed up dream. Right down to the hood that somehow made it impossible to see his face. There had to be a connection! It wasn’t like she dreamed about

clothes every night! She wasn't Ragyo Kiryuin or Nui Harime! And thinking she was *anything* like her bitch of a mom, even in the slightest, pissed her off like nothing else!

"Whoa! That's a really interesting sword you got."

While the cloaked interloper landed upon his feet without injury, Gilgamesh stared at the girl's sword, enraptured by its unique design and already amnesiac about his recent brush with death, "Do you mind letting me -"

"I was trying to chop this guy's head off! Not save your freaking life!"

Ryuko lurched at the disgusting interest in Gilgamesh's voice. Holy shit! Who was this creepy bastard and why was he so goddamn concerned about the Scissor Blade? Was he a pervert like Mikisugi? Sure, the guy was tall as hell and dressed really funny. Just like those pictures of samurai or something in history books. But he wasn't stripping his clothes in the middle of a conversation. Still, she contemplated smashing the Scissor Blade into the guy's stomach. Just to get him to back off and leave her the hell alone. It was a really good idea. And her eyebrow twitched at the gleam in his eyes.

But the cloaked asshole was seriously bad news.

And after the masked bastard pulled one surprise after another, she could stand to have some backup. Even if the guy was a serious freak.

"Aw... come on. How about this? If I beat this guy, you let me look at your fancy scissor sword!"

"... what?"

The stupid question threw her mind through a freaking loop. Was the bastard talking about a competition? Screw him! Nothing the guy said mattered! Especially when she had important things to worry about! With the corners of her mouth twitching, she took a deep

breath and elbowed Gilgamesh in the stomach. It wasn't the same as leaving the boisterous asshole by himself, but it got the freaking point across, "Take your nonsense somewhere else, will ya?"

"Eh-haha! Then we have a deal! The first to draw blood wins!"

Gilgamesh returned his unbridled attention towards their mutual adversary, keenly aware but unworried about his newest rival's frustration, "Now! Let us begin... uh... what was your name again?"

She looked at the swordsman before spitting on the ground, "Ryuko."

"Ah! Yes! First to draw blood is the victory, Ryuken!"

Her eyebrow twitched, "It's Ryuko, dipshit!"

"Ryuko, is it?"

The cloaked man leaned backwards, unbothered by the menacing undertone pervading the otherwise innocuous question. Ryuko. An interesting name for a peculiar girl. One he couldn't recall hearing before. He smiled, the gesture concealed within the darkness provided by the black coat. With an airy sigh, he dusted his arms, removing the final trace of his impromptu journey through the air, "Peculiar. And with such auspicious and strange clothing. Please, if I might be so bold as to ask, from where do you hail, Ryuko? Your clothing, that interesting blade and your propensity for seamlessly stringing vulgarity into poetry suggest an origin outside Lindblum."

Ryuko felt her fingers reflexively tighten around the Scissor Blade at the creepy question, "I'm not telling you anything?"

"And what about *you*?"

He leaned sideways, glancing exaggeratedly over his shoulder, "You're not from Lindblum either."

From his prone position behind the cloaked individual, Mickey narrowed his eyes. This wasn't good. No, this was really bad. He

could sense the darkness inside the guy's heart. It was stronger than expected. It was... unnerving... being in the presence of someone who threw themselves into darkness so readily. Who was willing to hurt thousands of innocent men and women to get what he wanted. But Ryuko leapt into the fray without any concern. She risked her life to save Gilgamesh's. She was willing to rescue someone she didn't know against a person threatening everyone in Lindblum.

And he couldn't let Ryuko risk her life against someone so dangerous.

At least, not without his help.

In a flash of brilliant light, he drew upon the strength dwelling within his heart. As the Keyblade inherited from Master Yen Sid appeared in his grasp, keychain dangling softly alongside a faint tinkling, Mickey answered the man's question, "If it's Regent Cid you're after, you'll have to go through us!"

"An acceptable proposal."

The man *grasped* something in the air. In a flicker of crimson sparks, a greatsword, no less dangerous or lethal than the earlier broadsword, appeared within his fingers, wisps of darkness rising from the polished surface, "Your bravery warms my heart. Any other day I'd spare your lives without a second thought. But *today*, I'm afraid to say, I have an appointment with the regent. And I simply cannot be late..."

Last edited: Mar 16, 2018

Unknown Report 2

Unknown Report 2

The seal was a work-of-art. A masterpiece.

And yet, it unraveled from nothing more than twisting his wrist.

In the ill-lit chamber long since forgotten by man and time, illuminated solely by flickering jade candles, the man dismissed his Keyblade. Allowing the ancient weapon to dissipate into motes of darkened light. Amber eyes framed by deep wrinkles observed the figure manifested from the chaotic darkness, which spilled forth across the chamber. Coalescing into a shape bearing only the slightest resemblance to its original self.

"Stand up."

He stared at the man laying at his feet, whose face had yet to leave the shadows, "There's no point continuing to feign such unbecoming weakness."

A sharp yet imperceptible *shing*. A flash of crimson darkness and subtle movement. Yet he didn't react when a broadsword pressed against his throat. Even when blood dribbled down his chin, staining the front of his shirt, he merely grunted, expressing minor disappointment in the ancient being's behavior, "Is this how you reward the person who freed you from your prison? Holding a sword to their throat?"

"I was merely saying 'Hello'!"

The former prisoner's presence lingered in the air. It filled every nook and cranny of the ancient chamber with darkness. The tainted, evil power seeped into the stones, causing the light itself to flinch, "Therefore, as professional courtesy, I must warn you. If you've come to kill me, it won't be nearly as easy as you believe."

His mouth twisted into a smirk as he lowered the broadsword from the unflappable Keyblade master's throat. With a wistful chuckle, he walked around the wizened being, red-violent hair absorbing what light remained, "Those adorable little flowers tried cleansing the darkness from my heart. They assumed their strength was enough to finish the task. Yet we know how that turned out, don't we?"

"I care not about your existence nor past confrontations. What I require from you, who was imprisoned by my predecessors and freed by my hand, is cooperation."

Without concern for his own safety, the master turned around, exposing his back to the ancient and highly dangerous prisoner, "For, you see, to accomplish my ambitions, the realm of light must be thrown into chaos. Uncertainty and fear need to be spread across the worlds. And the first step begins here, in Lindblum."

He clenched his fingers into a fist, the emerald candles lining the walls of the chamber momentarily flickering, "I require someone of your talents to disrupt the peace between this world and the others. To shatter the connections binding to them. To force my lethargic brethren into ignorant panic. That is why I freed you from the seal. Why I risked exposing my plans to those who've forgotten that darkness begets light!"

A beat passed.

And then the man laughed.

"Far be it for me to look the chocobo in the mouth. Especially when speaking to whom I can thank for ending my most... *unjust*... imprisonment."

He dismissed the broadsword with a casual flourish of his arm, allowing himself to once more appear unarmed and defenseless, "Your words hold truth. But your performance, on the other hand, lacks substance. So, although time ebbs and flows rather vindictively, I must politely refuse your entreaty without prejudice."

“With *one* exception.”

Weaving his hands together, calloused fingers rubbed against each other as he waited for the wizened master’s reaction. Yet none came. The man was truly unflappable. Which meant only one thing. Patting down his jacket, he took the liberty to fix his favorite scarf and adjust the accompanying grey and white mantle. And, once his appearance was impeccable, held a single finger between his eyes, “If you truly covet my services, I’ll require proper incentive. Motivation, if you will. And, I’m afraid to confess, threatening to seal me away won’t be enough.”

With an exaggerated pivot, he motioned to the left of the only entrance into the chamber, “For unless math has changed during my absence, you require another *two* Keyblades before attempting such a foolhardy maneuver.”

Vanitas stepped forth, emerging from the shadows with Void Gear in hand. The helmeted youth’s unseen gaze was locked upon the prisoner. Yet the Keyblade master’s stern glare was enough to dissuade the youth from speaking, allowing him to address the man without interruption, “Very well. Here is your incentive. In two weeks, Cid Fabool the Ninth will preside over the Festival of Champions.”

“Cid... Cid...”

The man repeated the name several times. And then spontaneously chuckled, though not a hint of mirth filled his laughter. For a moment, the light in the chamber completely vanished into darkness, filling the shadows with an eerie twilight that clung to the skin. That tainted the heart. And as the paling of his skin to alabaster and liquid darkness dripping from each of his orifices vanished, returning his appearance to some semblance of normalcy, he muttered under his breath, “It doesn’t have quite the same ring to it as Garland. In any case...”

He jauntily stepped towards Vanitas, causing the unbalanced existence to raise his Keyblade, before stopping, one hand rubbing

his chin, "Am I to presume this festival occurs beyond the Grand Castle's walls?"

The Keyblade master tracked the former prisoner, "Then do we have an accord?"

"Indeed, we do!"

Clapping his hand together, the man prepared to leave. But after but a single exuberant step and the stench of freedom filled the confines of his former prison, turned around, lips slightly parted, "Oh! Forgive me! For I have one last question, if you have the time. Call it morbid curiosity - or simply curiosity, if you will - but why does a Keyblade master of your prodigious *experience* desire the regent's untimely death?"

"With Cid Fabool's death, Lindblum would be thrown into perpetual chaos. The knowledge of interworld travel forever lost."

His gloves crinkled, the fabric stretched as he folded his arms against the small of his back, "Destroying everything the Fabool's have accomplished. Is that not what you desire above all else, Ardyn Lucis Caelum?"

"Please, my dear wordsmith, I've long since discarded that name."

Ardyn swept an arm lengthwise, a black fedora grasped firmly within his fingers. Placing the adornment upon his head, his smirk widened and, with a mocking bow, strutted around the wizened Keyblade master, a corridor of darkness forming with naught but a thought, "Ardyn Izunia, at your most humble service."

Chapter 2.7

[img: [https://t00.deviantart.net/1fXHBcUAHH3fErzk-iaMwTi-Ciw=/fit-in/700x350/filters:fixed_height\(100,100\):origin\(\)/pre00/1981/th/pre/f/2013/333/a/b/ryuuko_matoi_angry_by_limitus-d6vyafz.jpg](https://t00.deviantart.net/1fXHBcUAHH3fErzk-iaMwTi-Ciw=/fit-in/700x350/filters:fixed_height(100,100):origin()/pre00/1981/th/pre/f/2013/333/a/b/ryuuko_matoi_angry_by_limitus-d6vyafz.jpg)]

[“Go to hell!”](#)

The Scissor Blade collided with the cloaked bastard's sword in a flurry of sparks. The blades sweeping alternating paths of light and darkness through the air. Dust clung to her clothing as blood seeped from fresh wounds. Sweat dripped down her face, stinging her eyes and staining her jacket. With an awkward pivot, Ryuko ducked underneath the guy's sword, mouth pursed into a tense snarl at the darkness wrapped around the weapon. Another exhausting vault took her out of range of the subsequent eruption of darkness, the ground crackling with dark-tinted magical energy.

“God damn it!”

She bolted across the field, looking to put as much distance between herself and the bastard when Gilgamesh plummeted out of the air. The hell was he thinking? Was the swordsman trying to hit her? Stumbling from the impact of the boisterous guy throwing everything and the kitchen sink against the bastard, Ryuko glared over her shoulder. For a big guy, Gilgamesh was a lot faster than expected. He could probably give Satsuki a run for her money. At least, if her sister didn't get sick and tired of his attitude. But hopefully he'd distract the bastard long enough to catch her -

A *boom* echoed across the stadium as Gilgamesh sailed overhead, crashing into the emptying stands with a deafening *whump*.

“What the hell?”

Ryuko cursed when the ground exploded underneath her feet. Several vulgarities spewed forth when she crashed into the wall, leaving a noticeable crack. As her vision wavered, blood trickling from the gash above her right eye, she grimaced, shaking her head while ignoring the ringing in her ears. Damn it! The bastard was just full of surprises! Not only was he strong as hell, he was fast! Faster than the masked asshole! And worse, this guy could teleport all around the freaking field!

How was anyone supposed to take down someone like that?

Snarling, she stumbled onto her feet. Curling her fingers around the Scissor Blade, she spat to the side, removing the disgusting taste of blood from her mouth. Thanks to Mickey tagging in for Gilgamesh, she had time to think. Alright, so the bastard could teleport. Big freaking deal! She dealt with worse at Honnouji Academy! Nui Harime did the same thing. And now the Grand Couturier was dead! But with time to gather her thoughts, Ryuko watched Mickey finally cutting loose. How he leapt around the cloaked bastard, Keyblade clashing against various weapons. Casting multiple kinds of weird magic. Fire. Lightning. Ice. Even a few spells that made no sense.

And then he went bouncing across the field.

“Just freakin’ great!”

Even knowing the cut would sew itself closed in less than a minute, Ryuko rubbed her temple, smudging the dripping blood. The cloaked guy was tougher than expected. But he wasn’t the strongest she’d fought. No, that disgusting honor was reserved for dear old mom. But with Senketsu standing at her side, none of this would be happening! The asshole would be a smear on their first! The fight would’ve ended in the blink of an eye.

But if it wasn’t for Senketsu, she’d...

“Damn it!”

Whether she liked it or not, this wasn't the time to think about Senketsu. She needed to remain focused on stopping this guy in his tracks.

Because with Gilgamesh and Mickey out of the picture, he was looking straight at *her*.

"Enough with the cheap bullshit already!"

She moved before the bastard summoned another weapon out of the strange pocket dimension. With her sneakers slipping against the fallen rubble, she sprinted sideways, keeping close to the wall, eyes tracking the dagger leaving his fingers. Pivoting at the last second, Ryuko swung the Scissor Blade into the approaching projectile. Her muscles tightened, elbows and shoulders locking as she sent the weapon tumbling into the stands with an ear-deafening *clang* of metal upon metal. Preventing the guy from warp-teleporting, or whatever the hell he'd called it, across the field.

Only to freeze when he blinked out of existence anyway.

"I'll have you know that was my favorite dagger."

A broadsword sliced through her left arm before she could *move*, "And you tossed it aside like yesterday's trash. Is that custom on your world, Ryuko?"

The bastard's voice grated on her nerves. Her left arm was hanging onto her shoulder by a few scraps of muscle. Even so, with a defiant snarl, spittle flying between her lips, she stomped her foot against the ground before stopping the follow-up attack. Sending a resounding *clang* echoing across the stadium.

"Is it custom to talk like an asshole?"

The Scissor Blade quivered in her blood-soaked fingers. It struggled against the magical broadsword trying to slice through her body from shoulder to waist. But that wasn't what pissed her off. What drove

her to want nothing more than to punch the bastard in the face. Her cuts and bruises would eventually regenerate. Even the paralyzing gash on her arm would weave back together or something in a few minutes. But this guy wasn't the type of person to wait around. He wouldn't stand back and allow her body to heal itself good as new!

Her right arm buckled at the elbow, forcing the Scissor Blade closer to her face. Sweat dripped from her chin. Her lungs burned. Her sneakers slipped against the ground, toes curled as she desperately tried to hold back the bastard's supernatural strength.

But at the last moment, as her strength faltered, slick fingers slipping around the Scissor Blade, everything turned a vibrant shade of emerald.

And her regeneration kicked into overdrive.

The gash on her arm stitched itself closed. Her Life Fibers sewed everything together nearly as fast as when she wore Senketsu.

"Take this!"

Her knuckles cracked as they slammed against the bastard's face. The hood crumpling from the force. As when he staggered, she took the opportunity to retreat, blood-covered fingers clenching at the dirt. Her left palm planting itself against the ground before she flipped backwards, landing back onto her feet. What the hell happened? How did her regeneration kick itself into overdrive? It wasn't like Nui Harime's. Or Ragyo Kiryuin's. Without Senketsu, something like that was impossible. But when the asshole turned around, acting like she hadn't punched him, Ryuko suspiciously following his gaze.

Straight to Mickey, who was holding his Keyblade overhead with both hands.

"Relying upon the mouse's assistance, are you?"

Ardyn stared at the Keyblade wielder, conveying his disappointment in the purest method available. The mouse was truly an inconvenience. Acting just when he had crushed Ryuko's hopes of victory. Yet he brushed aside the surprise. In the blink of an eye, he stepped forward, closing the distance between himself and the girl. Intent on striking her down. Or rather, assumed so. For her strange blade intercepted his own. Sending out an ear-deafening *clang* again and again. And again. More than a dozen times she stopped his attacks, reacting much quicker than anticipated.

But there was something else. A particular... peculiarity... about the girl. Something he'd noticed in the imperceptible fraction of time before the mouse cast Curaga. He'd been certain the muscles and tendons in her left arm were severed. Yet the wound restored itself faster than should be possible, even with restoration magic of the highest tier.

And in such an unnatural fashion.

"Ah, but there's nothing necessarily *wrong* with seeking reinforcements."

He settled into an overhanded grip upon catching her sword against his own, "You understand what I mean, don't you? Darkness or light, you care not where power originates. Simply that it affords you the opportunity to achieve your aims."

"Shut up!"

Her fingers tightened around the Scissor Blade's grooved handle, muscles quivering and lungs burning. Damn it, didn't this guy ever shut up? She was sick of hearing his voice! With a snarl, she twisted her ankles, sneakers daggering into the ground, rubber soles grinding dirt. As the Scissor Blade trembled against the bastard's weapon, she sneered, glaring straight into his shadowed eyes.

"I don't care about light or darkness! Or any other nonsense! The only thing that matters..."

Blood dribbled down her chin while the bang of crimson lying flat over her left eye shimmered brightly in the sunlight, "... is kicking your smug ass until you start talking!"

"Well then. If that's truly your desire, allow me to ask a question of my own."

Something changed. An ominous feeling. A shiver down her spine. Crap! It was almost identical to the weird feeling she had when Nui Harime appeared at Honnouji Academy out of nowhere. Or better yet, when Ragyo Kiryuin put on Junketsu before tearing out her heart. So, when the bastard chuckled in his messed-up way and darkness oozed from his body, Ryuko listened to her instincts.

Only for a finger to poke her chest.

"Are you familiar with the phrase, 'hitting one's stride?'"

Pain.

And his laughter.

She remembered *nothing* else before regaining consciousness several seconds later.

"The... hell..."

Blood gushed through her teeth. Darkness clung to her body. It soaked into her clothes. Burned her skin from the explosion. Through half-opened eyes, she noticed the stadium growing smaller in the distance. With the wind whistling in her ears, Ryuko gasped, flakes of blood and spittle escaping her lips. What the hell happened? One second the guy was mentioning a bunch of nonsense and the next everything was exploding around her. Darkness. She remembered that. The weird stuff came out of nowhere. Slamming against her body with the force of a large truck.

"This bastard... thinks he's... hot stuff!?"

Ryuko forced her arms and legs to move. Despite feeling worse than after she got her ass kicked halfway across Honnou City by that boxing freak, even with the painful burns covering most of her stomach, she clenched her fingers, tightening her grip on the Scissor Blade. Glancing over her shoulder, she spun around, waited a moment, and then slammed her sneakers against the slanted roof, sending faded blue tiles and bricks falling to the street. Another second passed before she managed to stab the Scissor Blade into the roof, dragging the weapon through the attic and leaving a jagged scar on the building.

Gasping for breath as blood dripping from her fingers, Ryuko stumbled before regaining her balance. People were screaming in the streets. Shouting about something. But the only thing she cared about was the bastard. She *knew* he was coming. He was the kind of asshole who liked to gloat. To mock her efforts while claiming he was stronger. More powerful. Or several other types of crap. But powerful or not, his teleportation gimmick was predictable. The instant she saw one of his swords, daggers or even that behemoth of an axe flipping through the air, she'd be ready.

"Looking for someone? Perhaps I can be of service."

A sword slashed across her back.

Lurching off the roof, blood gushed from the wound before another blade stabbed into her stomach.

With blood gushing from the wounds, Ryuko gathered enough strength to swing the Scissor Blade to parry the bastard's rapier.

Only for a halberd to cut open her shoulder.

Refusing to scream, her back convulsed when she slammed against the cobblestone, sadistic laughter echoing in her ears. But no matter what, even on the brink of unconsciousness, she held onto the Scissor Blade. Refusing to let go of the only thing from home. Of

why she was fighting this bastard. Risking her life for people she didn't know.

"That was quite unexpected."

Ardyn strolled towards the fallen girl with an air of contentment and callous laziness. Compared to initial expectations, she proved much more difficult to put down. Even now, having suffered extensive injuries, she remained conscious. Blood gushed from the wounds inflicted upon her body. The liquid spewed forth in copious amounts, pooling on the ground. And yet she remained defiant until the bitter end. Her fingers, though they trembled from shock, firmly clasped the strange, crimson blade.

"Even those adorable little dandelions couldn't withstand such grievous wounds. At least, not without my dear brother's assistance."

As he sauntered across the bazaar, citizens and guards alike fleeing his presence, Ardyn wagged his finger, chastising the girl struggling to remain conscious. When she didn't respond to the complement, he pressed his boot against the Scissor Blade, pinning the weapon to the ground, "Yet here you are, refusing to concede defeat. Or even the natural processes of the flesh."

"There's no reason to play coy, Ryuko."

The black coat clung to his clothing when he crouched before the defiant teenager, "If the mouse hadn't interfered, your injuries would have restored themselves in due time. You have some measure of regeneration. A powerful one, at that. Perhaps not the strongest in the realm. But still, even these normally lethal wounds, left to their own devices, will soon become nothing more than a distant memory. Which begs the obvious question."

Ardyn breathed deeply, malevolence clinging to his heart, "Why are you and I fighting this pointless battle? We should be allies! Why, with your strength and my humble guidance, we could lay waste to this realm! Drag each and every world into darkness!"

Blood dribbled down her chin. It filled her mouth. But Ryuko glared at Ardyn. Listened to his sarcastic mocking. And then spat on his chest, "Go... to... hell..."

"Care to raise your voice?"

He raised his arm, grasped an ephemeral broadsword, before *thrusting* it through Ryuko's back. As the teenager gasped, unable to properly articulate the torturous pain, Ardyn callously stood up, one hand cupped to his ear, "For I do believe you mentioned something about besting me in combat. But, alas, I must have imagined it."

Nostalgia brought back memories, both fond and nightmarish, as he wrenched the blade free, earning another pained curse from the fallen girl, "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a long overdue appointment with the regent."

His voice carried jovially as he stepped over Ryuko, the broadsword in his fingers vanishing in a flurry of crimson speaks. She truly was interesting. Despite her extensive injuries, more than enough to incapacitate even the most hardened warrior, he doubted Ryuko would succumb. Thus, with more than a hint of enthusiasm in his voice, Ardyn halted midstride, turned around, and exclaimed, "Oh! One last thing before I depart! If you somehow survive what's coming, know that I eagerly await your glorious attempt at retribution!"

"Light!"

Halting midstride, the sole of his boot barely grazing the cobblestones, Ardyn chuckled at the obstinate declaration. With the terrified screams of Lindblum's population nothing more than a faded whisper upon the wind, he watched the mouse land in the middle of the bazaar, intercepting his escape before it took root. The majestic Keyblade, as well as his diminutive body, positively *glowing* with light.

"Intent on rescuing the girl?"

The smirk etched upon his face broadened. Yes, the mouse's intentions were obvious. Ryuko laid bleeding across the bazaar. Necessitating the Keyblade wielder having to physically cast him aside. To strike him down with the best of his abilities. A rather difficult task if, however, one didn't throw caution to the wind. But, alas, the mouse wasn't aware of the girl's peculiar abilities. For if the Keyblade wielder knew of Ryuko's regeneration, he wouldn't be so willing to cast aside his life.

He laughed when columns of brilliant light encircled his existence. Called forth by the mouse. How peculiar. A technique of this magnitude required the caster's heart to be exceptionally devoid of darkness. Perhaps there was more to the mouse than initially met the eye. For this much power... this much blindingly pure light... possessed the capacity to pose a significant threat. Rendering his long-awaited retribution impossible.

Thus, with a flick of his wrist, a spherical wave of magic enveloped the bazaar and surrounding architecture.

"Well, I certainly can't blame you for trying."

The comment fell upon deaf ears as he stepped through the frozen pillars, scintillating particles of magic and light shimmering in the sunlight. With the sound of terrified panic severed at the source, Ardyn pondered existence. A moment's respite, one could say, before approaching Mickey, who was unwilling - or rather, unable - to move. Necessitating an obnoxious and exaggerated bow, "Ah, but please forgive my rudeness. If you have the time, I'll be more than content explaining the situation."

His voice refused to echo. The words clung to his throat, immediately falling dead in the stillness pervading the bazaar, "Stopga. A devastating magic, wouldn't you agree? A sufficiently capable sorcerer could lay vulnerable even the most powerful adversary. Rendering their best-laid plans and defenses all but useless."

Looming over the frozen mouse, a dagger shimmered into existence between his clenched fingers, "Particularly when one doesn't announce their intentions!"

"Octaslash!"

Ardyn glanced at the boisterous swordsman plummeting through the skies. Energy wrapped around the six, rather than eight, swords seeking to skewer his body. Intrigued as he was by the multi-armed warrior's straightforward assault, he nevertheless vanished in a flurry of crimson darkness.

"Curses!"

Landing in front of Mickey, who was still caught within the overwhelmingly powerful time magic, Gilgamesh grumbled at the villain's unexpected retreat. Confound it! He was certain the guy would be surprised that he, one of the greatest swordsmen in the realm of light, evaded his dastardly technique! With his cloak rustling in the lukewarm breeze, he removed the swords of legend from their impromptu scabbards, flakes of cobblestone clinging to the blades.

And then winced at the wound carved across his chest.

The pain from his injuries was excruciating. Nearly as torturous as the incident with the red chocobo. It was incredibly unlikely, but the possibility existed that this villain complemented his attacks with anti-magic abilities. Or, considering the tremendous amount of darkness bubbling within his heart, was extremely powerful. Far more than any adversary he'd engaged so far. But ill omens aside, retreating was out of the question. His pride, and to a greater extent annoyance, prevented him from fleeing for his life. While this villain's basic attacks gave him pause, it wasn't enough to stifle his desire to win.

Not by any measure.

"Humph! Do you intend to leave me hanging all day?"

He swung one of the legendary blades overhead, a phantasmal clock appearing beneath his feet. With a sound akin to shattering glass, the hands on the clock sped up, becoming nothing more than a blur as the obnoxious effects of the villain's magic was reversed. Causing time within the bazaar to resume. And still in the midst of his incantation, Star Seeker held towards the heavens, Mickey blinked, surprised to see Gilgamesh standing in front of him. It took a moment to piece together what happened. And a little longer to understand how the cloaked man caught him off guard. But as his attack finished, exploding in a brilliant display of white light, Mickey stepped around the swordsman.

"Thanks, Gilgamesh! I would have been in a lot of trouble if you hadn't saved me!"

Nodding in appreciation, Star Seeker settled in his grasp as he focused everything upon the villain. It was hard to tell earlier, but the darkness radiating from the guy's heart was growing worse by the second. If they didn't act quickly, odds were none of them would walk away from this fight unscathed, "But from now on, we need to be extra careful. He's a lot stronger than expected. And impatient. By the time I tracked him down, he'd already severely hurt Ryuko."

"Hmm?"

Gilgamesh blinked, then stared at the prone figure lying on the ground across the bazaar, "Is she dead?"

"Ryuko's tough, but she's not going to last much longer. Not without help," Mickey guiltily confessed, "So, if it's not too much to ask, I'm going to need you to keep this guy busy."

"If it's a distraction you require, then a diversion is what I shall provide!"

The soothing sensation of restoration magic afforded him incentive. Grunting his appreciation at the mouse, Gilgamesh hefted the six blades of legend. The swords gleamed in the light as he shifted one

foot backwards. Breathing deeply, he stomped upon the ground, narrowed eyes glaring at the heinous villain. Ryuko dying? A ludicrous notion! He might have spoken with the girl less than five minutes ago, maybe ten minutes on the outside chance, but his newest rival wasn't someone foolish enough to kick the bucket! At least, certainly not before the winner of their competition was properly determined!

"Round Three begins NOW!!!"

With the *keening* of metal, he sprinted towards the cloaked villain, bombastic voice echoing across the district, "And this time, I, Gilgamesh, shall show you no mercy!"

Last edited: Mar 23, 2018

Chapter 3.1

Like I said, I was forced to split the battle against Ardyn into multiple parts. The first part was the effective 'end' of Chapter 2. And the second part begins Chapter 3. And, as always, it's interesting to see the butterfly effect of Ryuko's appearance on Lindblum spread throughout the realm of light.

[img:

<https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/finalfantasy/images/3/34/Ardyn-Izunia-Render-FFXV.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/777?cb=20180102041856>]

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 3 - Through the Fire and Flames

Honestly, how long are you going to sleep, Ryuko?

Someone was shouting in her ears.

“Ryuko!”

The world snapped back into focus, colors blurring together into a strange, enticing kaleidoscope.

“Ryuko!”

With a gurgling cough, Ryuko picked her face off the ground, dirt and blood sticking to her skin. Hissing angrily, she clenched her left hand into a fist, knuckles growing bloody as they scrapped against the cobblestones. Spitting out a wad of blood-tinted saliva, she forced herself onto her knees, then shivered when a breeze brushed against her stomach, courtesy of the large gash across the front of her jacket. God damn it! The bastard was holding back. She knew it! And yet he *still* kicked the shit out of her! Shaking her head, she stabbed the Scissor Blade into the ground.

Then noticed she wasn't alone.

"Huh? Mickey?"

"Thank goodness you're okay!"

At the guy's palpable relief, she looked down, grimacing at the blood soaked into her clothes. Crap, her injuries must have looked really bad. She hadn't looked this terrible since Mako and Satsuki knocked some sense into her. It was embarrassing. And that, more than anything else, pissed her off. Focused squarely on the cloaked freak hiding somewhere nearby, she lurched onto her feet, sneakers slipping briefly, and pushed aside Mickey, "Where's that bastard?"

"Are... are you feeling alright, Ryuko?"

Her frustration immediately deflated at Mickey's genuine concern. Mouth agape, a confused groan escaped her throat before she glanced away from the mouth. Damn it, what the hell was she doing? Back home, nobody would have blinked if she brushed off getting impaled. They would have shrugged. Accepted it. Then helped beat the shit out of the bastard trying to kill them. But Lindblum *wasn't* home. And Mickey didn't know anything about Life Fibers, Ragyo Kiryuin or Kamui. Not a damn thing. Just like she knew nothing about Keyblades or darkness or anything involving this messed-up place. But knowing how nice and polite Mickey was, he must have thought she was dying. He probably risked everything to save her life.

And here she was, lashing out like an ungrateful bitch.

"Yeah, I'm... fine."

She breathed deeply through her nose. Ignored the unnerving silence pressing around them. And then quickly apologized, "Sorry about that. So, you... uh... healed me again? With your magic, right?"

"Yeah."

Smiling from relief, Mickey offered Ryuko his hand. A gesture the teenager graciously accepted. Gosh, for a moment, he was worried she wasn't feeling well. Even with Curaga, most people wouldn't want to go back to fighting. Sure, the physical injuries are healed, but magic isn't perfect. Ryuko's heart must be exceptionally strong for her to push through the mental trauma, "But I couldn't have done it without Gilgamesh. If he didn't keep that guy distracted, I never would've been able to help you."

"That guy, huh?"

Ryuko ran her tongue against her lips. Then immediately regretted tasting the mixture of blood and dirt, "Guess we better go save his annoying ass before he gets himself killed."

"Hold on, Ryuko!"

He rushed around the teenager, "I want to help Gilgamesh. Because leaving him alone with that guy? Well, it makes me feel awful. But before we do anything, we need to come up with a plan to beat this villain!"

"A plan?"

The disgusting taste in her mouth vanished. Giving a moment's reprieve before it was replaced by familiar bitterness and panic. Mickey wanted help coming up with a plan? That was the worst possible thing he could say! She was the sort of person to come up with things on the fly. To fight by the seat of her pants. Satsuki said she was good at improvising. But weird word or not, improvising helped her kick most of Honnouji Academy's ass. It helped her and Senketsu beat Satsuki in Osaka. And that was fine. Because every time she tried making a strategy, things always went to hell.

Every time!

"Sorry, but we don't have time to stand around."

Her eyebrow twitched when a weird, unnerving sensation sent shivers rippling down her spine, “Besides, I already thought of a kick-ass plan.”

Mickey turned away from the approaching darkness, “You have?”

“Yeah...”

She rubbed her forearm against the corner of her mouth, “Something he said got me thinking. This guy’s really strong. But if I learned *anything* back home, it’s that people don’t bother defending themselves when there’s nothing to worry about. He’s probably got some sort of weird, messed-up regeneration. Something to surprise us. But I’d like to see him try surviving getting his freaking head chopped off!”

The emphasis in Ryuko’s voice startled Mickey. Far more than it should. Even if what she said about the villain made sense. She was serious about killing him. Maybe her world really was that different from most of the realm. And perhaps she was still angry and frustrated that her world was gone. That no matter what, she could never go back home. But even so, he had the duty, not as a Keyblade wielder or king, but as her friend, to help Ryuko. Even if killing this villain was the only way to ensure innocent people weren’t hurt, or worse, he would do everything he could to make certain Ryuko didn’t do anything she might regret.

“Ryuko, you might be right, but I don’t think -”

An armored figure, cloaked in darkness-tinted magic, crashed through one of the many businesses lining the bazaar, sliding across the uneven cobblestones before staggering back onto their feet.

“Confound it!”

Once the world finished spinning and the migraine vanished, Gilgamesh shouted at the top of his lungs. Things weren’t going as expected. Actually, they were pretty much *worse*. Blood trickled

down his face. His armor, freshly buffed and polished this morning, was blemished by cuts and cracks. The scarf around his neck lay tattered. The fabric burnt. Fabulous tassels frayed. The magical property to resist elemental magic neutralized. A disturbing dilemma. Nevertheless, he raised his blades. Prepared himself, despite a horn on his kabuto severed at the base, to continue acting as a diversion.

Which wasn't enjoyable in the slightest.

"How long does it take to heal someone? They're really leaving me hanging here!"

"Gilgamesh!"

"Huh? Who's asking?"

The voice sounded awfully familiar. High-pitched. Polite. Turning around, he guffawed upon realizing his ascent, and subsequent descent, returned him to whence he came. Right back to the beginning. Yet he couldn't help but rear his head back and laugh. For this was fantastic news! Although her clothing was somewhat risqué and resembling something that fought a paint cat, Ryuko was back to her normal self. Angry and no longer on the verge of death.

"Ryuko! I see you're back in fighting shape!"

Continuing to laugh, he pivoted with a dramatic stomp of his boot, three blades of legend aimed across the bazaar, "Finally! Our contest can resume as scheduled!"

"Whatever..."

Ryuko rolled her eyes. She could barely resist cursing the guy out. Like *hell* would she let him touch the Scissor Blade, let alone hold it. That stupid contest meant nothing. With a snap of her wrist, worn sneakers slipping against the cobblestones, the Life Fiber weapon transformed into Decapitation Mode, shimmering brilliantly in the

sunlight. And then gawked when Gilgamesh invaded her personal space, “Hey! What’s the big idea!?”

“Wow! It can transform as well?”

She shuddered as Gilgamesh stared at his reflection on the Scissor Blade. How his creepy fingers moved. All thirty of them. And the perverted glimmer in his eyes was starting to freak her out! Without hesitation, she leaned backwards, raised her leg until it was nearly level with her chest, and smashed her sneaker against his stomach. Physically forcing the guy away and giving her some much needed breathing room.

“Back off! No way I’m letting you anywhere *near* this thing!”

Her fingers twitched the bastard laughed, brushing off getting his ribs smashed underneath her sneaker. He was insane! They were fighting tooth-and-nail against a sociopathic asshole and he was thinking about some stupid, half-baked contest? She had no clue what was wrong with Gilgamesh. But she was saved the effort of asking when Mickey decided to intervene before things got out of hand.

“This is no time to relax, Gilgamesh.”

Mickey gave the swordsman the sternest glare he could muster. Something he learned underneath Yen Sid, “Right now, we need to remain focused on stopping this guy. Luckily, we’ve kept him busy. But that won’t last much longer. If we don’t figure out a plan, innocent people might start getting hurt. Or worse.”

“I don’t care about his stupid competition.”

She jabbed her thumb towards Gilgamesh, “The only thing / want is to kick the crap out of this bastard. But that’s gonna be really difficult.”

The silence pressed upon her ears. The anger in her voice dissipated, eventually leaving her standing in the middle of the bazaar with a cold chill racing down her spine. Satsuki always said she was clever. And Senketsu said she was a lot smarter than people thought. Something she used to her advantage against Satsuki and anyone else standing in her way. That's why she knew taking down this guy was impossible. Not without Senketsu. Or a freaking miracle. The last time they fought, when she gave *everything* to hit the bastard, he nearly killed her without breaking a sweat.

And the thought of dying on this messed-up world without ever seeing Satsuki or Mako again scared the shit out of her.

"That's why, if you got a plan, I'm all ears, Mickey," she bit the inside of her cheek, bloodied fingers grasping the Scissor Blade, "Because I'm not the best person to think of a strategy or something."

"Hmm..."

Mickey wracked his brain. He'd studied under Master Yen Sid for a long time. Trained alongside Donald and Goofy as musketeers. He even learned a thing or two from Pete. But this was different. He wasn't afraid to admit this villain was beyond any of them. The darkness in the guy's heart was disturbing. Over the years, he'd met people with darkness within their hearts. After all, everybody had *some* darkness. Just like everybody had some light. But whatever light there might have been in this guy's heart was long extinguished. Leaving behind a monster who wanted nothing more than to destroy Lindblum.

"You're right about one thing, Ryuko. Stopping this guy is going to be difficult."

The keychain attached to Star Seeker jingled as he faced the teenager, "He's proven himself stronger than any of us. Including Gilgamesh."

“Hey! What’s that supposed to mean!?”

“But we *can* stall for time,” Mickey stared at the Grand Castle looming over Lindblum. He couldn’t see a single airship or cab. It was worrisome. But, somehow, he knew Regent Cid and Captain Basch were safe, “Right now, Master Beatrix’s visiting Queen Garnet of Alexandria. And even if she’s busy, Beatrix is capable of sensing darkness better than pretty much anyone. Even myself and Master Yen Sid. So, I’m positive she’ll be here soon!”

“SHE WILL!?”

The abandoned stall shattered when Gilgamesh backed into it, spilling ripe fruits and vegetables onto the ground. With leaves sticking to his armor, and both Ryuko and Mickey staring in his direction, he quickly backtracked, “Err... what I mean is... this is a fortuitous turn of events! A warrior of Beatrix’s strength would surely tilt the battle against this heinous villain in our favor!”

“This Beatrix...”

Ryuko glared at Gilgamesh. The sword-collecting freak was hiding something. Nobody gets that upset without having skeletons in their closet, “She that strong?”

“Beatrix is stronger than all of us combined.”

Not for the first time, Mickey found the feeling of explaining otherwise mundane topics to Ryuko both strange and satisfying. It was fascinating. But the situation was growing worse by the second. It was only a matter of time before the villain grew impatient, “We’re actually really lucky she’s visiting Alexandria. Unlike Master Yen Sid, Beatrix travels throughout the realm, keeping everything balanced between light and darkness.”

“Lucky us...”

Sarcasm dripped from her mouth. Stalling for time wasn't really her thing. But she could suck it up. Because the guy kicking their asses was worse than Nui Harime. He was almost as insane as dear old mom. If they didn't keep him busy until this super-powerful master or whatever arrived, he'd start killing people. All with a shit-eating grin on his ugly face, "But ya got me. If we can't beat this guy, we can sure as hell stop him from getting what he wants until this Beatrix person arrives to kick his ass!"

"Is that so?"

The sun vanished behind the Grand Castle when the cloaked man appeared in the smoke created by Gilgamesh's departure. Darkness wrapped around his hazy silhouette as an ominous breeze rushed through the bazaar, clearing the dust and exposing the malevolence clinging to his tainted heart, "It occurs to me I never formally introduced myself."

"What the hell..."

Sweat dripped down Ryuko's face as an unnatural darkness enveloped Lindblum. The lanterns hanging from buildings and stalls, visible inside foggy windows and the distance, flickered into life. Shadows stretched into disturbing shapes, growing longer with every passing second. The overcast sun vanishing, causing twilight then nightfall to descend upon the innocent world. A darkness without the comforting presence of stars illuminating the heavens.

"Humph," Gilgamesh bolstered himself, refusing to acknowledge the fear causing his knees to tremble, "A mere illusion. Nothing to worry about."

Mickey grimaced at the unnatural darkness. There was no question about it. Ryuko was absolutely correct. There was only one way to make sure this villain could never hurt innocent people! Spinning Star Seeker around his fingers, he leapt forward, streams of white light enveloping the Keyblade as he glanced over his shoulder, "Now's not the time to give up!"

“Izunia. Ardyn Izunia.”

With naught but a wave of his hand, the black coat concealing his handsome visage dissipated into motes of disintegrating darkness. Returning to whence it came, wherever such a place may be. But, more importantly, leaving him wearing something more appropriate for the situation. Chuckling softly, a smile played upon his lips at the fear radiating from Ryuko, the mouse and the swordsman. His skin turned a pale alabaster, darkness running from his mouth and eyes, “At your humble service.”

“Ardyn, huh?”

Ryuko tried smirking at the ridiculous name. But the visceral darkness writhing around the bastard plucked at something deep in her heart. Forced adrenaline through her veins. All she could manage was a nervous snarl, “What kind of stupid name is that?”

“You, of all people, should understand the significance of a name, Ryuko.”

Ardyn brushed aside the half-hearted criticism of his self-chosen identity. He sighed, a wistful expression more akin to someone seeking the sweet allure of the past. And the daemonic features betraying his allegiance - his origins, if one were so bold as to presume - faded, “But that aside, I should confess I care not for the people of Lindblum. Their concerns, worries and so on and so forth mean nothing to me. I merely desire to destroy everything my brother created. Nothing more.”

“Your brother?”

As realization dawned upon the mouse, his grin twisted malevolently, “Yet thanks to your interference, the regent is out of reach. Protected by the Grand Castle. My entrance, as always, forever barred.”

In a flash of darkness-tainted magic, an extravagant broadsword, the ancient emblem of Lindblum etched upon both cross-guard and

blade, appeared between his fingers, “As consolation for denying me my long-awaited vengeance, I shall be taking your -”

He was cut off midsentence, death threat still clinging to his twisted lips, when an enormous wave of ice crashed against his body. The powerful magic broke every bone in his body. It pulverized his organs. It left him immobile. Unmoving. His arm extended as the deadly magic continued spreading, transforming his flesh into pale, cloudy ice.

And then, without warning, he *shattered*.

“Holy... crap...”

Ryuko couldn't believe her eyes. As her breath emerged in pale wisps, the temperature plummeting to below zero, she stared, mouth agape, at the shattered remains of Ardyn, permafrost spreading across the ground. What the hell just happened? Gilgamesh didn't know crap. The freak looked more shocked than her! But Mickey seemed confused. A weird reaction from a guy who threw around magic like it was the easiest thing in the world.

“You have my sincerest apologies.”

Ice clung to his sleeve as, with naught but an errant thought, he teleported before Mickey. Preventing his apprentice and those fighting at his side from approaching the shattered pieces of their adversary. His stern gaze, which had countered Mickey's more adventurous and mischievous instincts over the years, hardened. Expressing a level of seriousness that brooked no arguments. Anger was visible in his eyes. Frustration his apprentice had never seen before. Sky-blue robes rippled as he *clenched* his fist, a translucent sphere of shimmering magic forming around Ardyn.

“To think Ardyn Lucis Caelum would escape imprisonment.”

Yen Sid waited until the Stopza settled into place, firmly locking Ardyn both physically and temporally, before looking over his

shoulder, “I thank the stars to have arrived in the nick of time.”

Last edited: Mar 29, 2018

Chapter 3.2

This is the second half of Chapter 3's opening and the final part of the Ardyn battle, which includes a small hint of Yen Sid's power. And as I tend to do, the last several paragraphs of the previous section were rewritten from scratch. Anyway, enjoy the update.

[img:

https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/finalfantasy/images/8/84/Episode_Ignis_Ardyn.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20171030222317]

In a flash of darkness, an extravagant broadsword, the ancient emblem of Lindblum engraved upon both cross-guard and blade, appeared between his fingers, “Thus, as recompense for denying me my long-awaited vengeance, I shall take your -”

He was interrupted, death threat still clinging to the air, when an enormous wave of ice crashed against his body. The magic left him immobile. Unable to move an inch, his arm extended with frost-covered fingers grasping the sword. Widened eyes staring blindly as the deadly spell seeped into his flesh, transforming skin, muscle and bone into cloudy ice. The atmosphere itself grew deathly cold, frost spreading across the ground.

And then, without warning, he *shattered* into thousands of pieces.

“Holy crap...”

As her breath emerged in pale wisps, the temperature plummeting below zero, Ryuko stared, mouth agape. What the hell happened? Glancing at Gilgamesh when the ice covering most of the bazaar evaporated, she grimaced at the guy’s bewildered expression. And her suspicions only deepened when she turned to Mickey, the mouse looking totally confused. A weird reaction from someone who threw around magic like it was the easiest thing in the world. With

the corners of her mouth twitching, the Scissor Blade settled into her fingers, the polished metal biting cold despite the warming temperature.

“You have my sincerest apologies.”

Ice clung to his fingers as, with naught but a thought, Yen Sid teleported in front of Ryuko, Gilgamesh and Mickey. His stern gaze, which had many times extinguished his apprentice’s more adventurous and mischievous instincts over the years, hardened at the darkness permeating Lindblum. Expressing seriousness that brooked no arguments. Rendering even Ryuko speechless. Sky-blue robes rustled as magic and light manifested from his heart. With anger radiating from his eyes, he silently clenched his fist, a translucent sphere of pulsating magic surrounding Ardyn before enveloping the entire bazaar.

“To think Ardyn Lucis Caelum would escape imprisonment.”

His voice faintly echoed as the Stopza settled into place, trapping Ardyn both physically and temporally, before glancing over his shoulder with a single eye, “I thank the stars to have arrived in the nick of time.”

“Master Yen Sid?”

Mickey couldn’t believe what he was seeing, “How did you -”

“You disobeyed my orders, Mickey.”

Despite the disappointment in his voice, Yen Sid could not find it in his heart to further scold Mickey. Seeing his apprentice unharmed, albeit exhausted, was heartening. For he still felt the dredges of panic upon attempting to divine his apprentice’s location only to find himself blinded by a powerful darkness. A deep-seated fear that Mickey’s life was in danger. That he *must* depart for Lindblum if he wished to intercede before it was too late.

A nightmare only moments away from becoming reality.

“But considering exigent circumstances, I’m willing to forgive this transgression.”

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Ryuko stared at the sorcerer.

This old man was Yen Sid? The same guy Mickey said was his boss? And he *destroyed* Ardyn, the bastard who nearly killed them without breaking a sweat, using nothing more than a single attack? She licked the inside of her mouth, ignoring the vile combination of blood, spit and dirt. There were a lot of questions she wanted to ask the wizard. Like how the hell he did that. And whether or not she could do the same thing. But right now, she had more important things to worry about. So, shivering in the cold with goosebumps racing down both of her arms, Ryuko narrowed her eyes.

“Hey, Yen Sid... err, Master Yen Sid...”

She almost flinched under the sorcerer’s absurdly stern glare, “How do you know this Ardyn guy?”

“Through stories and fragmented legends.”

Yen Sid pondered the underlying meaning of the girl’s question. While immensely relieved he arrived before Ardyn Lucis Caelum could overwhelming Mickey, it was his apprentice’s associates - or perhaps, friends - which drew his notice. He, of course, knew Gilgamesh, even if the swordsman believed his more notorious actions remained unnoticed. How Mickey came to not only stand at Gilgamesh’s side, but have the infamous swordsman willingly place his life on the line, was a mystery. At least, for the moment. That matter could be addressed later. At a more appropriate time. For the swordsman risked his life against Ardyn. Buying thousands of innocent beings enough time to reach safe harbor.

The girl, on the other hand, he did not know.

Was she a denizen of Lindblum?

Or perhaps a competitor from the Festival of Champions?

His brow furrowed, eyebrows bunching together in thought. He'd never seen this girl. Not once. And yet, for reasons which eluded him, Mickey trusted her. She stood at his apprentice's side as comrades. Wielding a crimson blade shaped like a scissor. She was a warrior. That much was apparent. And from her disheveled appearance, it was apparent Mickey saved her life. But those wounds weren't normal. Ancient and physically manifested darkness clung to her clothes.

To not only remain standing after suffering such grave wounds, but withstand Ardyn Lucis Caelum's darkness?

The girl's heart must be strong indeed.

"Forgive my lack of decorum," Yen Sid stroked his beard, one eye focused on the shattered remains of their adversary, "But there's little time for formalities. What is your name? And from which world do you herald?"

Ryuko balked at the questions.

And then bit the inside of her cheek.

"The name's Ryuko," she snuck a glance at Gilgamesh. Why the sword-collecting freak looked *more* nervous after Yen Sid saved their asses made no freaking sense. But after running her tongue along her jaw, took another deep breath, "And I can't answer the other question. Not until I get answers from this bastard! Because he's working with the masked freak who destroyed it!"

For the first time in recollection, Yen Sid found himself speechless, "Destroyed?"

"We're, um, not entirely sure what happened."

Mickey mulled what else to say. Whether to say *anything*. The choice was agonizing. Not because he didn't want to help. That was the further thing from his mind. He wished he could tell Ryuko everything would be fine. That she could return home to her sister and friends. But lying would only make things worse. And he couldn't remember seeing Master Yen Sid this upset before. It was worrying, to say the least, "And, well, Ardyn didn't confess or anything. At least, not that I heard. But Ryuko's convinced, and so am I, that he's working with the person who attacked her world. Someone wielding a Keyblade!"

"A Keyblade?"

A chill stabbed Yen Sid's heart at the unexpected response.

Ryuko heralded from the world upon which light and darkness clashed in a terrifying calamity. A disaster he had believed involved the Heartless. But this changed everything. For the stars had not mentioned the bearer of a Keyblade. Nothing in his divinations suggested the presence, let alone existence, of such an individual. To conceal oneself from the stars was no small feat. And with Ardyn Lucis Caelum escaping imprisonment?

This was *far* from a coincidence.

"An ominous sign."

Narrowing his eyes, he returned to Mickey's empathetic answer. Or rather, what his apprentice left out. Callous as it was, Ryuko's survival was unintentional. A critical mistake on the part of this masked bearer of the Keyblade, "But for now, you must retreat before -"

"You have my *deepest* sympathies, Ryuko."

With darkness wafting from his body - nay, emanating from his heart - Ardyn stepped over the shattered remains of himself. A rather surreal experience. And once he had their complete attention, focused the majority of his sympathies upon Ryuko, who appeared,

shall one say, less than enthusiastic, "To lose one's entire world, friends and family alike..."

"... to have everything you cherished snatched from your fingers..."

He reached towards Ryuko, sauntering forward another step, "... is an unbearable agony unlike any -"

An immense fireball erupted from Yen Sid's outstretched hand with nary a word of warning.

His eyes widened, pupils dilating at the heat and flames.

And then promptly diverted the conflagration off the edge of his sword.

Ardyn smiled as the concussive force of the magical attack, an impressive one at that, caused his coat to rustle. All but knocking his fedora into the errant wind. Within the searing heat scorching both stone and concrete, its magical properties ensuring everything *burned*, he dismissed the broadsword. Releasing what, some might say, was his only means of defending himself against the sorcerer. Impressed, he looked over his shoulder. Purposely, or rather deliberately, turning away from his adversaries. Staring with genuine amusement as the empty bazaar transformed into a maelstrom of death and destruction.

"Impressive. Most impressive."

His grin broadened at the sorcerer's stoic façade, which concealed mounting anger. With a flamboyant flourish, he pivoted sharply. The motion didn't go unnoticed. Not by the sorcerer or those he would give his life protecting. To think he would encounter a thaumaturge. And once capable of such advanced and devastating magicks. The fates surely must be plotting against him. For what else explained his long-awaited retribution being stalled so fervently on such a momentous day? Oh, this was going to be troublesome. He could feel it. But it was not Ryuko nor her comrades that bothered him. No,

defeating them wouldn't take more than a small application of strength. Of *true* power.

But the thaumaturge was another issue.

"Yen Sid, was it?"

He dusted his shoulders, unencumbered by the heat still scorching the bazaar. Yet his voice, despite the crackling flames, reached their ears, "You want to know something? I'm starting to believe defeating you will be quite difficult! And not for a lack of trying, mind you!"

Pursing his lips, Ardyn looked back and forth, observing their reactions. Or, to be more specific, the reaction of a particular individual. He strutted towards the group, sauntering across the sizzling cobblestone. With steam wafting around his boots, he halted, "Simply put, I'm unconvinced I possess the strength necessary to end your life. You *far* surpass those dandelions when it comes to the magical arts. And yet, allow me to speak frankly, I couldn't help but notice something strange about your, shall we say, dramatic entrance."

His skin paled to a chalky alabaster as he looked beyond the sorcerer, "An undue amount of concern towards an inexperienced bearer of the Keyblade for -"

"Fantasia!"

For Yen Sid, nothing more needed to be said.

To Mickey and the others, it was as if Ardyn disappeared within an explosion of magic. As his master's voice dispersed the surrounding darkness, bolts of lightning shot forth from the heavens. Ice and flames erupted from the ground, simultaneously freezing and incinerating the villain. The air whipped into a maelstrom of razor-sharp winds, slicing through both flesh and stone. Particles of magic whipped across the bazaar in a titanic display of light and energy,

enveloping reality within the turbulent hurricane originating from Yen Sid's raised arms.

And Ryuko, who was nowhere near the epicenter of destruction, stared in shocked bewilderment.

Her jaw dropped at the fantastical display of overwhelming magic. What the hell? This was magic? Ignoring the dryness in her throat, she tried looking straight into the blinding energy surrounding Ardyn, searching for the psychotic bastard. But she couldn't see anything. It was too freaking bright. She was forced to close her eyes, multicolored spots dancing across her vision. Her teeth clenched into a strained grimace when a shockwave exploded across the bazaar, brushing wisps of magic against her face.

Looking back, maybe she and Senketsu couldn't have beaten Ardyn. At least, not without throwing everything they had against the bastard. And Satsuki coming up with a plan to kick his ass.

But Yen Sid was even stronger!

"Ah, I believe you sought a masked individual?"

The pressure from his boots dislodged several tiles, sending the faded ceramic falling to the streets below. He crouched against the roof, staring at the thaumaturge while darkness wafted from his body. It oozed from his ancient heart. But the sorcerer's power, and its effects upon himself, wasn't his concern. Not at the moment, at least. With his skin charred by both fire and lightning, Ardyn propped an elbow against his frostbitten knee, something resembling shadowy blood dripping down his fingers. For all intents and purposes, to those gathered to stop him, he was seriously injured.

And yet, before their eyes, the grave wounds vanished, "One wielding a Keyblade, perhaps?"

"What the hell do you know!?"

“Let’s just say such an individual was present upon my release.”

He smirked at the girl’s incessant demand. And while Ryuko was, for lack of better terminology, the focus of his attention, he wasn’t one to fixate. Her anger and frustration did allow him leverage. Leeway he wouldn’t normally possess. But all good things must come to an end. And with that thought, Ardyn reached into nothingness, fedora clasped in his fingers. As a corridor of darkness splintered reality, he shook his head, standing once more upon his feet, “Someone who, dare I confess what happened, insisted upon the regent’s death.”

“With that, I bid you all a fond farewell!”

The darkness enveloped him, but not before he pointed at the girl doing her best not to lose her temper, “Especially *you*, Ryuko. For I’m certain you and I will see each other again...”

As she watched the bastard disappear, Ryuko bit the inside of her cheek, filling her mouth with the coppery taste of blood. The Scissor Blade trembled in her fingers, knuckles bleeding white. God damn the psychopath! God damn the masked bastard! And everyone else screwing with her!

“... crap!”

Blood oozed from the corner of her mouth as she hissed. She wasn’t stupid. The bastard was threatening her! And whether she liked it or not, there was nothing she could do. The freak was too strong. She threw everything into kicking his ass, pulling every scrap of power she could muster, and he returned the favor sevenfold without breaking a sweat. Damn it! First the masked freak destroyed her world. Then, just as she discovered there wasn’t a *home* to go back to, another sociopath working with the bastard shows up out of nowhere. If it wasn’t for Yen Sid, she’d be dead.

Damn it, just how bad was her freaking luck?

“We should consider ourselves fortunate.”

As afternoon returned to Lindblum, Yen Sid stroked his beard. The underlying threat of Ardyn Lucis Caelum's departing words did not bode well. Yet, for the moment, his focus wasn't on Ardyn, but the girl next to his apprentice. Turning around, his brows furrowed at the vulgarity. And what Ryuko restrained herself from uttering, "Ardyn Lucis Caelum's power was formidable. If he'd stood his ground, the outcome would have been uncertain."

"You could have beaten him, right?"

Star Seeker vanished into motes of white light as Mickey took in the destruction wrought by his master. It was extraordinary. Amazing. And, to be honest, a little unnerving. He trained alongside Donald back at the castle. He knew more than his fair share of magical spells. And sure, maybe he read some of Yen Sid's private tomes. Just to get a better idea of how light and magic mingle and coexist. But he'd never seen something like *this*. Or his master not just disappointed or upset, but legitimately angry.

Was it possible for him to stop time like that?

"I mean, Ardyn must have been bluffing," Mickey watched Ryuko transform the Scissor Blade back to normal, briefly interested in *how* the sword worked, before shaking his head and finishing, "If he returned or... um... you didn't have to worry about protecting us, surely you could defeat him!"

"Hmm... perhaps."

The sorcerer pondered his apprentice's question. Mickey made an excellent point, although it was not one he wished to consider. Nor a choice he would have made. And without another word, he swept his arm lengthwise, magic coursing around his fingers. In a soothing flash of light, the extensive damage from his confrontation with Ardyn diminished. Wooden stalls appeared out of nowhere, bereft of product but otherwise immaculate. Cobblestones and brickwork fell back into place with another wave of his hand.

Yet his mind laid elsewhere.

Eraqus and the others needed to be informed upon his departure from Lindblum. Perhaps even sooner. Prudence could no longer be afforded. For time, now, more than ever, was of the essence. A deeper connection existed between the destruction of Ryuko's world and Ardyn Lucis Caelum escaping imprisonment. The latter, of which, would require direct action. But the addition of this unknown Keyblade bearer, if Mickey and Ryuko were correct in their assumptions, made things exponentially worse. He could not fathom the possibility. A bearer of the Keyblade working alongside the Heartless was a significant and grave threat to the realm of light.

One not experienced since the ancient war of legend.

By any means necessary, this atrocious individual needed to be brought down.

"Where do you think you're going, Gilgamesh?"

"I... uh... just remembered something important!"

An orange aura flickered around Gilgamesh before he took off in a dead sprint, moving as fast as his legs could move. His arms pumped back and forth. All six of them. His armor and weapons jingled as the magic bolstered his movements. All he needed to do was reach the other side of the bazaar before Yen Sid realized anything was wrong. Teleportation only went so far. He just needed to lose the sorcerer by fleeing into one of the hundreds of alleys around Lindblum. To lie low until the heat died down and -

His momentum ground to a halt when the lower half of his body was abruptly encased within a block of immensely bone-chilling ice.

"I believe you absconded with something that doesn't belong to you," Yen Sid lowered his finger as the multi-armed swordsman continued struggled, "I'm certain Beatrix will be happy to know Excalibur's been located."

Gilgamesh put everything he had into shattering the magical ice. He tried beating it, stabbing it and even breaking it through sheer physical strength. But when nothing worked - rather, his efforts only made things worse - he deflated with a whining groan, "Oh, darn it..."

"Mickey. Ryuko."

With the issue involving Gilgamesh's theft of Alexandria's royal treasure finished, Yen Sid returned to the matter at hand. Turning towards his awaiting apprentice, he folded his arms across his chest, brow furrowed into a frown, "Not only did you both confront Ardyn Lucis Caelum, you did so to protect Lindblum and countless other worlds from his incomprehensible evil. Thus, I commend your selfless bravery and heroism. Yet chastise your recklessness and foolishness."

"Hey!"

Ryuko's mouth pulled into a snarl, "If it wasn't for us, the bastard would have killed everybody! Including Regent Cid!"

Yen Sid allowed the teenager to vent her frustrations. Although her language wasn't appreciated, he could not deny the legitimacy of her point. He might have driven Ardyn away, but it was only thanks to their recklessness that Lindblum avoided a significant catastrophe. Cid's death would have undoubtedly thrown the world into chaos. Leading to countless deaths across not only Lindblum, but every other world connected to it.

"Ryuko, was it?"

As guards entered the marketplace led by Basch Fon Ronsenburg, he addressed Ryuko, his tone lacking sternness, "The loss of your world is an atrocity beyond comprehension. A pain I shall never understand. But when you're ready to talk, I have several questions concerning what happened. What you witnessed might be critical to stopping this Keyblade bearer from destroying further worlds."

“Alright.”

She *really* didn't want to talk about it. But moping around wasn't going to solve anything. And getting angry with Yen Sid wouldn't help her find Mako or Satsuki. Or bring the masked freak to justice. Rolling her shoulders, she stabbed the Scissor Blade between her feet and pulled at one of her bloodstained sleeves, “But you mind if I get some new clothes first?”

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Chapter 3.3

[img:

<https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/finalfantasy/images/2/24/FF9Stiltzkin.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/327?cb=20140418235725>]

“All finished, kupo!”

Moodon stood on the edge of the wooden stool as he examined the result of hours of back-breaking and pom-pom wilting work. Ensuring not a single stitch was out of place. He pulled on one sleeve. Brushed his paws against the inside hem of the pants. And then wrapped the measuring tape around his neck, satisfied with the outcome, “What do you think, kupo?”

As the human looked into the full-length mirror, he nodded, red pom-pom bobbing alongside the motion, “It took three days, kupo, but I couldn’t allow the savior of Lindblum to walk around dressed in bloodstained rags. I have a reputation after all, kupo!”

“Uh...”

Ryuko didn’t know what to say.

All she could do was stare at her reflection. At the strange clothes she was wearing. The moogles... err, Moodon or something... tried designing pants that stopped right below her knees with zippers and extra belts. The latest fashion or some stupid bullshit nonsense. But she managed to put a stop to that crap before the confused moogles could say ‘kupo.’ Because there was no freaking that was ever going to happen. All she wanted, and what she *told* the moogles, was something normal. Nothing fancy. The bare minimum. Which the moogles somehow took as a suggestion. Because her new pants,

black with a vibrant mixture of light and dark indigo patterns, were still a little too baggy for her tastes.

But at least they reached her sneakers.

Which the moogle also tried replacing.

Until she *forcibly* changed his mind.

The rest, on the other hand, was entirely different.

Ignoring the tightening inside her chest, she resisted the urge to scratch her stomach. And then pull off the skin-tight black shirt. It was uncomfortable. But nowhere near as bad as when Mako somehow tricked her into wearing something strangely similar. Because at least she could breathe without feeling like something was squeezing the air from her lungs. It sucked but given the alternatives, the sensation would pass. Or she would start ignoring it.

Whichever came first.

Over the shirt, perhaps the only thing she remotely liked about her new threads, was a short-sleeved black jacket. It didn't have any stupid crap like extra zippers or straps going across her chest. It was a normal jacket. Biting the inside of her cheek, she tucked both hands into her pockets. The jacket was similar to her old one, which was lying in a pile next to her bed with her pants and shirt. The colors were different. And she was pretty damn sure Moodon didn't use cotton or silk or whatever. But the jacket felt fine. Her clothes felt fine. Maybe she was overthinking everything.

Her open jacket, the zipper dangling from the bottom, rustled as the warm breeze rushed through the open window.

And she found her thoughts suddenly souring.

Maybe the skull across the back of the jacket was identical to the original, only vivid blue instead of white. And sure, the dragon-like

designs across the front were perfectly copied. She made *sure* of that. But no matter how much she tried convincing herself or Moodon argued, this wasn't her jacket. These weren't her clothes. They were comfortable, but wearing new clothes, even if she needed them, made her feel like total shit on the inside.

Like she was betraying Senketsu.

She still remembered their last moments together.

His final words as they fell back to Honnouji Academy.

Senketsu might have said it was fine to wear other clothes. That it was part of outgrowing a sailor uniform. And maybe for a few weeks she believed those words. Or convinced herself there was nothing wrong. Because living with Mako and her family, hanging out with Satsuki, going to school and trying not to fall asleep in class, helped to deal with the pain. At the memory, she forcibly clenched her trembling fingers into fists. Now that everything she loved was destroyed, or worse, expressing even the slightest happiness about wearing something new or fashion - hell, feeling happy about *anything* - made her feel like crap. Almost like she was cheating on Senketsu behind his back despite knowing he would have been fine with this.

In the end, Ryuko grimaced, forcing herself back to reality.

"... thanks."

Her voice was little more than a strained whisper, "It's fine."

"Humph! Is that all you have to say, kupo?"

Moodon couldn't believe his ears. Was a simple 'thanks' the only thing she had to say. Huffing under his breath, he hopped off the stool. He floated gently onto the floor, purple wings beating to keep him from falling face-first onto his pom-pom. And then marched across the bedroom towards the door before turning around, the

pockets of his vest bulging with sewing needles, spare thread and other tailoring accessories, “It’s not every day Lindblum’s best tailor makes a personal visit, kupo! A little gratitude would be appreciated!”

“Oh... uh... sorry.”

He tucked the measuring tape into his pocket while barely acknowledging the apology. The nerve of some people, kupo! Ungratefulness really rustled his fur! The rich and famous wore his designs, which normally went for tens of thousands of Gil at the bare minimum. Yet here he was, designing and stitching one of his best ensembles to date free of charge. And Ryuko claimed it was adequate? If she wasn’t one of the heroes who saved them from that villain, he would have given her a piece of his mind, “But hero or not, I’m going to charge full price next time, kupo!”

Ryuko blinked in confusion as Moodon walked out of her room, waddling slightly with every step. She tried not staring at the pom-pom sticking out of his head. Or asking what it was meant to do. Not after the moogle flew into a frenzy when she accidentally touched it.

She stood silently in the middle of the room, completely alone with her thoughts. Thinking about everything. The masked freak. Ardyn. Satsuki. Mako. And then, as her anger continued rising, collapsed onto the bed with an annoyed groan.

“Shit.”

Her unfocused eyes stared at the ceiling. Disheveled hair fell across her face, the bang of crimson over her left eye appearing to glow in the sunlight. As the breeze through the window picked up, she turned her head, lazily watching a large airship meandering across the sky. Thanks to Cid, she could see most of Lindblum from her room. Including the misty fields just outside the city. And the weird, misshapen twilight on the horizon. Far enough way that she couldn’t tell if it was a mirage or not. Grimacing, she raised her arm before angrily punching the bed, her fist sinking into the thick blanket.

Alright, whether she liked it or not, she had new threads. Now she could focus on important stuff. First, she needed to find Satsuki, Mako and everybody else. But that was going to be freaking difficult. They weren't on Lindblum, which meant she needed to search the hundreds of other worlds Mickey claimed were only a small fraction of the realm of light. But she also needed to track down the masked bastard and make him pay for everything he did.

"Ugh!"

She tried closing her eyes. But getting any sleep was impossible. There was too much on her mind to relax. Too much to think about. And worst of all, she had no freaking clue where to start, "What am I supposed to do?"

"An excellent question."

As he entered Ryuko's room, Yen Sid leaned forward, lest his sorcerer's hat fall upon the floor. And then abruptly stopped several feet from the door. The silence was deafening. Most likely the byproduct of her continuing frustration and impatience with his absence. Stroking his beard, he closed his eyes. There were many things he could say. Some more helpful than others. But only the truth would alleviate Ryuko's concern. And so, despite the potential consequences, he began, "Yet before I say anything, allow me to express my gratitude. Having the courage to speak about your world could not have been easy. I wouldn't have blamed you had you wished to not remember such raw and painful memories."

"No, that's alright. It's fine."

With a resigned groan, Ryuko sat up, curls of disheveled hair bouncing against her forehead. It was really embarrassing listening to Yen Sid apologize for the fifth time over something that wasn't his fault. Crossing her legs together, she leaned forward, elbows pushing on her knees, "Whining and crying and getting all depressed ain't gonna change anything. So, I'm gonna focus on the next best thing. Hunting down the masked freak and making him pay!"

“Hmm...”

Her eyes narrowed at the non-answer. It was familiar in a suspicious, almost condescending sort of way. But when she opened her mouth to ask exactly *what* he meant, the question on the tip of her tongue, Yen Sid raised his hand, “As we speak, my colleagues are searching for Ardyn Lucis Caelum. Thanks to your efforts, we have a firm grasp of his abilities. Regent Cid also discovered the ancient Keyblade ritual originally used to seal him away in Lindblum’s Royal Archives, which will greatly lessen the difficulty of imprisoning him once more.”

“What about the other guy? The freak swinging the Keyblade?”

Yen Sid allowed himself to be guided towards the window. He stared at the enrapturing landscaping composing Lindblum, arms folded within his billowing sleeves. And did not speak a single word. The anger bubbling within Ryuko’s heart was troubling. She was consciously reining in her frustration. But it was merely a temporary solution. The loss of her sister and friends held a dark and deepening hold. At some point, that frustration would burst forth, leading to an outcome he’d witnessed time and time again.

A Keyblade bearer who allowed darkness into their heart... who unleashed Ardyn Lucis Caelum... is an unimaginable threat. But there’s more. I had hoped to be mistaken. That I might have misinterpreted the signs. But allow me to ask you, Ryuko, if you remember the creatures you claimed he summoned from darkness.”

The wind whipping around the Grand Castle rushed through the window as he turned around, staring over his shoulder at the teenager, “The stars whisper these creatures are somehow connected to negativity. To emotions. How, I cannot say. But their existence across multiple worlds, not only your own, implies a greater strategy. One that not only threatens the realm of light, but the balance between light and darkness. Thus, I cannot in good conscious allow you to seek him out.”

“Like hell you will!”

She leapt off the bed, landing right behind Yen Sid, “There’s no way _.”

“Nevertheless, I understand why you wish to do so.”

His brow furrowed at the outburst, “The terrible tragedy that befell your world cannot be overstated. Perhaps if I were in your position, I would wish for this individual to suffer. To pay for his crimes, no matter what it took. However, vengeance won’t accomplish anything.”

“Don’t get philosophical on me!”

Ryuko knew better than to grab Yen Sid. Instead, she settled for the next best thing, even if it didn’t make her feel better, “Do you know how many people the bastard killed? Mako and Satsuki might have escaped. But what about the millions of people who didn’t?”

Yen Sid couldn’t stop his eyes from widening.

What she said, the underlying facts strewn throughout her declaration, was bewildering to the point of speechlessness. A single, offhanded comment. Yet he buried his worry, the deep-seated concern circulating through his heart, beneath stoic calmness. Stroking his beard, he turned back towards the window, eyes closed, “Revenge is a path that leads one further into darkness. Even if you defeat this masked Keyblade bearer, the anger and hatred won’t disappear. It will fester, corrupting your heart until nothing remains but a hollow shell. You should focus on reuniting with your sister and friends. And leave dealing with Ardyn Lucis Caelum and the masked Keyblade bearer to us.”

“Then we ain’t got anything to talk about!”

She grabbed the Scissor Blade off the dresser. And in her anger, accidentally sliced through part of the bedframe, leaving an appreciable gash in the wood. What the hell was Yen Sid’s problem? What gave him the right to waltz into her room after everything that

happened and tell her 'tough luck' like that? The corners of her mouth twisted into an ugly snarl. Anger pulsed through her heart as she marched towards the door, wanting to get as far away from the sorcerer as possible.

Before stopping at the last second.

"I want to find Satsuki and Mako more than anything. I gotta know if they're alright. Because being in the dark like this... thinking something really bad happened to them... is screwing with my mind."

The confession emerged alongside a choked growl, misplaced guilt guiding her words, "But I can't ignore what the bastard did! Whether you like it or not, I'm going after him!"

"Is that a fact?"

A deep foreboding enveloped the room as Yen Sid unfolded his arms. The sunlight dimmed underneath the majesty of his presence. Yet he didn't speak. He merely stared at the teenager threatening to discard caution. To embark upon a dangerous journey that would conclude in tragedy. He could forbid her from leaving. Threaten to confiscate her Scissor Blade. But it was apparent she would leave Lindblum at the first opportunity, with or without his permission, "You have great potential, Ryuko. To see such potential squandered over something as fruitless as revenge cannot be allowed. However, my reservations aside, I hold no delusions I can change your mind with simple words. Nor actions or physical threats."

"Yet I shall give you the follow proposition."

Stroking his beard, when Ryuko's expression softened, he swept his arm in her direction, "Forego thoughts of revenge. Allow my colleagues to bring this masked Keyblade bearer and Ardyn Lucis Caelum to justice. If you agree to these reasonable terms I promise to use everything in my power to search across the realm of light for your friends and sister. No matter how long it takes, whether it takes

days, weeks or months, I will not rest until you're reunited. You have my word."

For what felt like an agonizing eternity, Ryuko stared at the sorcerer, unable to believe what she was hearing.

A persuasive voice in the back of her mind wanted to ignore Yen Sid, because revenge would prevent other worlds from suffering the same fate as her own.

Another voice whispered to accept the offer, because finding Satsuki and Mako was more important than anything.

Her hand clenched around the Scissor Blade, knuckles bleeding white from the pressure.

"I have a *better* option!"

She spun the Scissor Blade around her wrist, the Life Fiber weapon whistling through the air. And with Yen Sid's unrelenting glare narrowing, planted it between her sneakers, "Mickey helped me. The guy barely knew my name. But he risked everything to save my life. To fight Ardyn. He didn't need to do that... he could have run away... but he did. And I can't ignore that. Without him, and I guess Gilgamesh, I wouldn't be here talking back to ya!"

"And that's why..."

Her voiced echoed sharply as she *dared* Yen Sid to interrupt, "... me and him are gonna find Satsuki and Mako together! No matter how long it takes! We're going to kick the masked bastard's ass! And if you think I'm not strong enough, then tough luck! Because even if you're right, that doesn't change anything!"

Yen Sid couldn't remember the last time someone addressed him with such flagrant, overwhelming disrespect.

And yet it took immense willpower and concentration not to smirk at the declaration.

As much as she wished for Mickey's company, his apprentice wasn't prepared for such a harrowing and dangerous journey. One filled with risks and pitfalls, where the slightest mistake will lead one's heart to darkness. Much remained before Mickey's training was complete. For the king's impetuosity and propensity for getting into mischief delayed his studies. It would be months, perhaps even a year, before his apprentice was prepared, both in body and heart, to undergo the Mark of Mastery. At least, he must confess, that had been his original intent.

For the last few days had granted him new perspective.

"Though your motivations for confronting Ardyn Lucis Caelum were selfish, you nevertheless placed the safety of Lindblum and countless innocent beings above your own desires."

Confusion dawned upon Ryuko, granting him the opportunity to diffuse the situation, "Determination is what drives you, Ryuko. Your desire to reunite with Satsuki and Mako motivates you to achieve the impossible. To push beyond your limitations time and again. Your patience when dealing with authority might be strained. Your temper short. But your heart shines with an impressive light."

A bird chirped outside, followed by two more, as his brow furrowed, "But as you currently stand, you aren't ready to confront this masked Keyblade bearer, let alone depart Lindblum alongside my reckless apprentice."

"Then tell me what I need to do!"

The Scissor Blade tapped against her shoulder when she grimaced, then frowned, before glowering at the sorcerer with icy blue eyes, "Because I'm ready to do whatever it takes!"

"Very well."

She didn't know what the hell happened.

One second Yen Sid nodded his head, the faintest glimmer of light swirling around his fingers. She saw a few sparkles and other weird magical nonsense. Then reality transformed into unknowable colors. Something uncomfortable squeezed every inch of her body, which pushed right back. And then she was standing in the middle of a field, feeling nauseous and spots dancing before her eyes.

"Huh?"

Her jacket rippled alongside the ankle-high grass brushing against her pants. And it took a moment for the weird sensation in the pit of her stomach to go away. But when it did, Ryuko shook her head and looked around. She wasn't stupid. Yen Sid must have teleported her somewhere. Maybe another world. Because this sure as hell wasn't Lindblum. Grimacing at the sudden change of scenery, she folded her arms, hair rustling in the breeze whipping through the field, carrying the faint scent of salt water and mist. And then stared at the really strange castle to her right, which had a giant sword sticking out of the top.

There was something else on her mind. A strange itching just out of reach.

And her mouth curled into a smirk.

"Heh..."

She pushed against the damp soil, the soles of her sneakers sinking into the grass, "You're gonna fight me, right? This is one of the weird tests where you see how strong I really am or something."

"You must be Ryuko."

The coldness in the voice sent her over the edge. Acting purely on instinct, she jumped backwards, sliding across the field with the Scissor Blade grasped in both hands. Crap! She had no freaking

idea how this person appeared without making a sound! Was it teleportation or another weird magic? It didn't matter. Because right behind where she'd been standing, close enough to *touch*, was a woman wearing gold and crimson armor, the metal gleaming in the sunlight. Sweat dripped down her cheek when the opaque visor shifted. And then, in a flash of light, she squinted when the armor dissipated, leaving behind a woman wearing a sleeveless duster and an eyepatch over the right side of her face.

"My apologies for the short notice, Beatrix," Yen Sid frowned at the unstated accusation, "But your insatiably high standards aside, I'm confident Ryuko will exceed your expectations."

Beatrix narrowed her eye, a strange purplish-red, at the sorcerer's words, "You must have exaggerated, Yen Sid."

Shaking her head, chestnut brown hair shifted as she grasped the strength dwelling within her heart. The ever-present light guiding her actions. With a slight twitch of her fingers, Save the Queen materialized alongside a soothing burst of ruby light. Sunlight clung to the Keyblade, granting the rose-colored metal brilliance akin to flames. Turning the silver handle and accompanying keychain into a mystical pearl, "For someone who fought Ardyn Lucis Caelum and survived, she barely looks capable of holding that blade, let alone wield it."

"Nice try!"

Ryuko aimed the Scissor Blade at Beatrix, sneering at the older woman's arrogance. So, this was the great and powerful Beatrix. The woman Mickey claimed was one of the strongest people in the realm of light. Whose name scared the crap out of Gilgamesh. She wasn't impressed, "But it's not going to work! I'm going to get stronger no matter what it takes! And I think I'm gonna start by kicking your ass!"

"Perhaps this will be entertaining after all."

A smile played upon her lips. The determination in Ryuko's eyes was adequate. Chuckling, she tossed her hair over her shoulder, Save the Queen loosely grasped in her off hand as she shifted one foot backwards, "[Now then, shall we begin?](#)"

Chapter 3.4

“How did you do it!?”

Clank!

Inside the accommodating yet surprisingly humid dungeons underneath Lindblum's Grand Castle, Adelbert Steiner was apocalyptic with frustration. He was the captain of the Knights of Pluto! A position that demanded respect. Yet this common criminal was somehow pulling upon his final nerve! Ignoring the water splashing against the back of his neck, he slammed his fist against the magically-enhanced bars of the cell, “Excalibur was secured within the royal treasury! Only Queen Garnet or members of the royal family could enter without setting off the alarms! It's impossible for a criminal to just waltz into the castle! You must have had help! An accomplice or traitor! Tell me their name!”

“Bah! I take offense to your baseless accusation!”

Gilgamesh was in a terrible mood. It was bad enough Basch confiscated his entire collection of legendary blades. No thanks to Yen Sid. But the dungeon clearly wasn't constructed for a man of his imposing stature. He couldn't stretch without hitting his head against the ceiling. The bed was far too short. Not to mention extremely uncomfortable. The blanket was ratty and full of holes. The dampness chilled him to the bone. And the anti-magical nature of the cell meant he couldn't waltz out the front door when nobody was looking.

And now this angry man was yelling at him.

Folding his arms, all six of them, he glared at Steiner. Which the knight returned with twice the intensity. Humph! The nerve of some people! He was the mighty Gilgamesh! Collector of legendary swords! A renowned swordsman who clashed blades with Ardyn

Lucis Caelum. He had no need for partners. Wait, that wasn't true. He had Enkidu. But his old friend was doing something really important elsewhere in the realm of light.

But he was starting to get worried.

Three years without a letter, message or even a visit?

"Particularly when you have everything backwards," Gilgamesh scratched his cheek. Maybe he should send Enkidu a letter. It would be nice speaking with his old friend, "Because it was clearly your fault I acquired Excalibur."

"MY FAULT!?"

Clank!

Steiner leapt at Gilgamesh's audacity, "How dare you utter something so ridiculous!"

"But it was just *sitting* there. Doing nothing. When I broke through... err, evaded... the security, Excalibur was right in the middle of the vault. Floating above a pedestal doing nothing but gathering rust," Gilgamesh briefly paused, looked over the enraged knight on the verge of a stroke, before adding, "Not as rusty as your armor, at least."

Clank!

A gauntlet-covered fist slammed against the metal bars, "Why you -"

"Don't get upset with me! I was doing you guys a favor," he leaned backwards, trying his best to get comfortable. But the damp stones didn't help. And working out the annoying cramp in his neck would take at least another hour. More if the rusty knight continued pestering him with ridiculous and pointless questions, "Quite frankly, I don't understand why everyone's so darn angry."

"Because you stole Excalibur!"

Clank!

Hearing the criminal blame everyone but himself, having the audacity to consider stealing royal property 'helping,' boiled his blood. If it weren't for the bars keeping Gilgamesh from escaping... and him from entering the cell... he would strangle the thief. Or, at the very least, force a sincere apology. But he couldn't. Thus, his annoyance was relegated to continuing to glare at the swordsman, "Trespassing on castle grounds is a serious crime! And pilfering anything from the royal vault is a capital offense!"

"Humph!"

Gilgamesh thought of something to say, then stopped. Instead, he propped his chin upon a hand and grumbled, "You should be grateful I wielded Excalibur against Ardyn! That's what a weapon's for, after all! Fighting against strong and monstrous foes! Not floating in a treasure-filled vault gathering dust like a common collectable!"

"That's not the point!"

Clank!

Unable to listen to another word, Steiner spun around, hands shaking from indignation. How dare he! Gilgamesh wasn't a hero. He wasn't even a Keyblade master like Beatrix! He was a common thief masquerading as a swordsman. A con-artist who tricked people into thinking he was respectful. An act that fell at the first opportunity! Excalibur was a legendary sword once wielded by Queen Garnet's ancestor. Only a member of the royal family was worthy of holding the holy blade. And this criminal... this thief... was behaving like his heinous crime was nothing more than petty vandalism.

Confound it!

If he had his way, Gilgamesh would be thrown into Alexandria's dungeons for the rest of his life! But his anger suddenly abated, replaced by deep introspection, when he remembered something

important. Criminal or not, the multi-armed swordsman helped save countless lives from Ardyn Lucis Caelum's villainy. Maybe the benefit of the doubt was appropriate for the situation.

"... but perhaps your actions were somewhat heroic."

He folded his arms, staring firmly at the wall opposite from Gilgamesh's cell, "You might be nothing more than a common thief, but you *did* assist in saving Regent Cid. Not to mention helping King Mickey and that other girl."

Despite having a mind like a steel trap, Steiner suddenly drew a blank at the girl's name. That was odd. Such an interesting name couldn't have slipped his mind that easily, "Hmm... what was her name again?"

"Ah! You're talking about Ryuko, right?"

"Thanks," he nodded at Gilgamesh, "Now, where was I? You might be a criminal, but you assisted King Mickey and Ryuko against... Wait! Why am I thanking you!?"

Clank! Clank! Clank!

Anger swelled in Steiner's heart alongside a modicum of embarrassment. How could he fall for such a simple trick!? Gilgamesh was a common criminal who brazenly stole Excalibur and had the arrogance to blame everyone but himself for the crime! Then claimed it was for their benefit! And Now he was acting like they were comrades? Turning around with a rusty *clank*, he slammed his hand against the metal bars.

"If Regent Cid hadn't put in a good word for you..."

His lips pursed into a sour grimace as he desperately reined in his frustration, "... and Queen Garnet hadn't recommended we overlook your crimes in light of exigent circumstances, I'd march you back to Alexandria and lock you in the dungeons myself! But due to your

false heroism... and delaying Ardyn Lucis Caelum's rampage until Master Yen Sid arrived... you're free to go."

"Mwahahaha! Now that's more like it!"

The admission from Rusty was the first good news he'd heard all day! Leaping onto his feet, Gilgamesh cursed, then winced, when his forehead smacked against the ceiling. Bah! Such a minor injury meant nothing. Particularly an insignificant bruise. Thanks to his valiant heroism against Ardyn, he was once more a free man. Capable of doing anything he wanted with no consequences.

Folding two pairs of arms once the pain faded to a dull but manageable throbbing, he scratched his chin, aware of the knight's twitching eyebrow, "If it's not too late, I could swing by Bobo's and grab the daily special. Maybe even get a side of -"

"But Excalibur will be returned at once!"

"Aw, that's not fair..."

"And EVERY other weapon you pilfered!"

Gilgamesh scowled at the impossible request. With a huff, he collapsed back onto the floor, the dungeon creaking from the sudden change in weight. Humph! The nerve of this nobody to demand that he, the great Gilgamesh, surrender his weapons! It was like asking a Keyblade master to surrender their Keyblade. Or a sorcerer to stop casting magic. All but impossible by any stretch of the word. If he'd *lost* a fight or a competition against a worthy rival... someone like Ryuko... he could see allowing them to borrow one of his weapons. Just for a little while.

He had half a mind to ignore the request, break out of prison and reclaim his weapons!

But then again, he was facing some *serious* punishment. Even if he escaped, reclaimed Excalibur and fled to another world, Beatrix

would undoubtedly hunt him down. He'd never be safe. Or have a good night's sleep again. Every waking moment would be nothing but worry and concern.

His shoulders shifted uncomfortably at the thought. Alright, maybe he could return Excalibur. The darn thing was too much trouble. And he could always collect other, more powerful swords of legend. Like Ryuko's amazing Scissor Blade! That thing had to be at least two... or maybe three... times stronger than Excalibur simply judging its awesome design and ability to transform without magic. Not to mention it came in a pair. Two for the price of one!

He scratched his chin again.

Give up Excalibur or rot in prison for the rest of eternity.

Both were such terrible options.

"Fine! I guess I'll... I'll... *give up* Excalibur."

He glanced aside. Gah! Simply forcing those foul words between his teeth was nauseating! To give up a weapon was like tearing off an arm. Or worse. He'd rather deal with the divine fury of Beatrix or fight Ardyn with three arms tied behind his back than contemplate something like that. But he had no choice, "And take the other one as well!"

The second admission came surprisingly easy, which amazed not only himself, but the rusty knight who looked like someone poured cold water down the back of his armor, "What was its name again? Darn it, I should know this. Excalipoor? No... wait... was it Caliburn? Ugh, I wrote it down somewhere."

"Excalipoor?"

Steiner gawked at the sheer ridiculousness of the name. It threw him through a loop. His mind screeched to a halt. And then he slammed his fist against the cell. The nerve of him! Was the criminal mocking

Excalibur? Pardoned or not, such flagrant disrespect towards Alexandria's royal heirloom couldn't be tolerated, "Nonsense! It's obvious you're hiding the sword's true name because of some heinous crime! Admit it!"

"Bah!"

Gilgamesh scoffed once more. That anyone would consider him to be so... underhanded... was insulting. He *never* outright stole a weapon from another warrior. Every sword in his vast collection was won fair and square. And the others stolen from people too stupid or sentimental to understand the purpose of possessing one or more blades of legend, "I'm not here to debate your archaic sense of property ownership. I'm giving you Excalipoor because it doesn't work."

"Doesn't work? Did you somehow break it!?"

If an expression could convey his disdain towards the idea he would damage, let alone break, a sword, Gilgamesh would have already discovered it, "Of course not! I find your accusation insulting! Preposterous! It's just that... well... you see..."

Clank!

A gauntlet-covered fist pounded the air, "Well what?"

"It... um..."

Gilgamesh grumbled in the back of his throat, "... can't cut anything."

Silence enveloped the dungeon as Steiner processed the unlikely confession. Just a few cells down, water dripped into a large puddle. Somewhere overhead an airship flew around the Grand Castle. The sword couldn't cut anything? Impossible! This was just another excuse! Inventing a story about Excalipoor - or Caliburn - being useless was something a thief would concoct to evade prison. Gilgamesh must have accidentally dispelled the sword's magical

enchancements and was now, even pardoned by Queen Garnet, denying responsibility. Unable to contain his annoyance at such arrogance, he turned around, armor clanking.

“Enough of your lies! Alexandria will take possession of Excalipoor and the rest of your weapons until their proper owners are located!”

Clank! Clank! Clank!

Gilgamesh huffed as the rusty knight's footsteps faded into the distance. What a miserable day. It was painful enough surrendering Excalibur. But his entire collection? And to someone with no appreciation towards the craft? Honestly, what could a queen do with Excalibur? He had half a mind, not to mention the responsibility, to ensure his blades of legend didn't fall into the wrong hands. But his cell was magically reinforced. Virtually indestructible. By the time Rusty returned to unlock the door, his collection would likely already be in Alexandria.

“Darn it...”

Leaning forward, he propped his chin onto one hand, “I wonder if Ryuko's having any fun?”

Chapter 3.5

I had a lot of time to consider the best 'theme music' of this section. But in the end, I went with a classic.

Vulgar curses spewed from Ryuko's mouth when she slammed awkwardly against the ground.

"... shit!"

Darkness crept along the edges of her vision. The coppery taste of blood and dirt filled her mouth, grinding between her clenched teeth. But despite feeling like crap, Ryuko planted her hand against the ground. Her fingers clenched the loose soil, pulling out clumps of grass as she glared at the Keyblade master. She pulled every trick in the book. Played dirty. Cheated out of her ass. And yet Beatrix didn't have a single scratch.

God damn it, the woman was freaking strong!

With sweat dripping from her bloodied chin, Ryuko spat out the glob of saliva and blood filling her mouth. The Scissor Blade dragged across the ground as she propped an elbow under her body. This sucked! Maybe it wasn't as bad as getting her ass kicked halfway across Lindblum by that bastard, but Beatrix was giving him a run for his money. And what happened to holding back? Everything *hurt*. Her arms were covered with cuts and bruises. Blood trickled from the gash above her left eye.

And her chin was numb thanks to Beatrix to smashing her face against the Keyblade.

Which was *a lot* sharper than expected.

"... screw... her..."

Ryuko staggered back onto her feet, sneakers sinking into the damp soil when she took a single step. Holding the Scissor Blade in front of her body, she winced, sweat dripping down her face, before raising her other hand, bloodied fingers trembling before gripping the curved handle. She couldn't care less how strong Beatrix was! The woman could be the strongest bitch in the realm of light! But that didn't change anything! All that mattered was wiping the smirk off her face!

But as her sneakers sunk further into the ground, she froze when Beatrix disappeared in a flash of light.

And cursed when Save the Queen tapped against the small of her back.

"This fight is over."

Beatrix's mouth curled into the faintest facsimile of a smirk when Ryuko leapt forward, planted one hand on the ground, before pivoting sharply. Her eyebrow arched at the teenager's pathetic guard. There were dozens of openings. Multiple places to disarm Ryuko without wasting a single breath. Nevertheless, she was impressed. The girl's endurance was admirable beyond reproach. Her determination to land a single blow despite the vast difference between their respective abilities worthy of admiration. Enough that, for but a moment, she slightly lowered Save the Queen.

An opening Ryuko took advantage of, swinging the Scissor Blade before her Keyblade dropped more than an inch.

Amusement shimmered in the depths of Beatrix's remaining eye as she crossed her right foot over the left, subtly shifting her center of balance. Her hips pivoted counterclockwise while she tracked the Scissor Blade. Observing the angle of descent and the force behind the physical attack. A soft hiss of air escaped between slightly parted lips, carrying the telltale trace of laughter when she *caught* the hardened Life Fiber weapon within Save the Queen. And then

smashed her right hand into Ryuko's solar plexus. The resulting explosion of pain forcing the teenager onto the ground.

"... god... damn... it..."

The Scissor Blade almost slipped from her fingers. Lurching onto her hands and knees, Ryuko gagged, desperately holding her stomach. What the hell happened? She couldn't remember Beatrix being *this* strong!

"You've lasted longer than expected."

Her footsteps were purposeful. Deliberate. The *clanking* of her armored sabatons carried a vivid hint of menace as she stepped around Ryuko, transferring Save the Queen into her right hand with the casualness of greeting one's friend, "But I'm disappointed. If you cannot touch *me*, how do you intend on avenging your world? What would your sister think if she saw you now?"

"Fuck... you... if you... think I'm... giving up!"

A deafening *clang* reverberated through the deepest parts of Beatrix's heart when she intercepted the Scissor Blade, releasing a rippling explosion of magic across the field. The hardened Life Fiber weapon viciously trembled against her Keyblade. Sparks danced between her fingers and Ryuko's, emitting a faint warmth. Yet her arm didn't budge. Granting her leverage to grab Ryuko's wrist, pivot clockwise without blinking, and nonchalantly throw the teenager over her shoulder.

"But even so, I expected more from you."

Her tone remained cold, detached, even a bit emotionless, when Ryuko smashed against the ground, "*This* is the strength that repelled Ardyn Lucis Caelum? I cannot fathom Yen Sid's decision to bring you to me. It's obvious you're not worthy of my time."

"I'm not here... to freaking impress... you!"

Ryuko swallowed the blood pooling in her mouth as she picked herself off the ground. Damn it! Her fingers were numb. Every breath hurt like a bitch. And now Beatrix was acting all condescending! But despite realizing, perhaps a little later than most people, that the Keyblade master was completely out of her league, maybe stronger than Ardyn, she clenched both hands around the Scissor Blade, "I'm gonna find Mako and Satsuki!"

Simply *speaking* those words made Ryuko feel a thousand times better. The subtle trembling in her arms stopped. Wiping the blood off her mouth, she leaned backwards, stumbling as her sneakers slid in the dirt. And then, using all the energy she could muster, *expressed* her opinion, "Even if it takes everything I've got! And I won't let someone who has no freaking clue what happened stand in my way! You got that!?"

"... I believe I do."

An enrapturing combination of white and rose-pink light surrounded Save the Queen as Beatrix, for an imperceptible moment, closed her eye. So, this was it? Not for the first time, she found herself standing opposite of Yen Sid. Forced to dance to his tune. Something, if the circumstances were different, she'd admit was impressive. Perhaps enviable. It was for good reason she deferred to his expertise when it came to matters involving the eradication of darkness. Yet despite her exasperation towards the wizened sorcerer, Beatrix couldn't help but faintly smirk.

For now, after *failing* to beat desperation and hopelessness into Ryuko despite the vast difference between them, she understood Yen Sid's ulterior goal.

"Your form is atrocious. It's incomprehensible you've survived this long."

Ryuko blinked in confusion. Then shook the Scissor Blade at the woman, "Hey! What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

“But you’re experienced.”

Beatrix ignored the girl’s annoyance. Flipping her hair behind her ear, she stepped forward, focusing on the matter at hand. With a twirl of her wrist, she raised Save the Queen directly overhead. Reaching into the depths of her heart, she summoned the inner light which guided her actions. And as the numerous wounds adorning Ryuko vanished, healed by the emerald magic radiating from Save the Queen, continued, “And the sword you wield is unlike anything I’ve seen. I’m tempted to ask -”

“Don’t bother.”

It was hard to tell, but Ryuko thought Beatrix was *amused*. Glaring at the woman, trying she slowly, almost reluctantly, lowered the Scissor Blade. Maybe the woman healed her bruises and scrapes. And perhaps magic was useful. But she wasn’t in a mood to talk. Particularly about something like *that*, “Because it’s none of your business.”

“Hmm...”

Whether it stemmed from Ryuko’s audacity or defiance, Beatrix couldn’t say. But such trivialities weren’t concerning. The corners of her mouth quirked into a smile. Amusement that didn’t quite reach her eye as her gaze hardened, “Bearing the Keyblade is an honor. A privilege afforded to few yet desired by many. As my apprentice, don’t expect your training to be easy. Even if you’re naturally gifted, I won’t allow half-hearted efforts.”

“Wait a damn second!”

Ryuko had no clue what happened. She was stunned speechless. Unable to understand a single word of the ridiculousness. But as Beatrix’s weird offer settled into her mind, confusion transformed into anger. Then annoyance. Before finally, after an awkward silence, she shouted, her right eye twitching, “Who the hell said anything about Keyblades or whatever?”

“You don’t want the Keyblade?”

Unlike last time, instead of getting suckered into the trap, Ryuko scoffed under her breath, “If this is some sort of test, forget it. Because whether you like it or not, I’m not gonna lie. I sure as hell don’t want the Keyblade. But I’m never gonna find Satsuki and Mako without one of those things. *And* the masked bastard.”

The final comment about the masked freak emerged as a strained mutter, but Ryuko knew Beatrix heard every word, “So, fine. Whatever. Even if I don’t want one of your fancy, magic weapons, I’ll take it. Or pick one out. Or however this works.”

Beatrix’s purplish-red eye narrowed at Ryuko’s defiance.

Her fingers tightened around Save the Queen, eliciting an equivalent *hum* from the Keyblade.

Not a single doubt rested within her heart that Ryuko wouldn’t refuse the Keyblade. It was refreshingly honest. Almost surprising. She’d traveled to countless worlds. Some awakened to the existence of other worlds. And others ignorant. Yet, time and time again, beings inquired about Save the Queen. They desired, to varying extents, its power. And with that irritating thought, her attention shifted to the blade resting in her grasp, the rose-colored metal and intricate pattern befitting something akin to artwork. It rested loosely in her fingers, the polished silver keychain brushing against her wrist.

When Yen Sid explained what happened, she’d refused to believe it.

Not out of delusion or fantasy.

But guilt.

An entire world consumed by darkness? Overrun by Heartless until the very fabric of its existence was torn asunder, sending countless innocents into darkness? Such incomprehensible destruction sent chills racing down her spine. How could she have failed her duties?

She should have sensed the strengthening darkness. Taken action to counter the threat. *She* should have struck down the masked Keyblade bearer, a being whose existence she found utterly repulsive. Not Ryuko. But she didn't. She had remained unaware of the developed threat until it was too late.

And Ryuko's home, her friends and family, paid the price for her failure.

"The Keyblade is not a weapon."

A rose-pink aura shimmered around Save the Queen, "It's your hopes and dreams made manifest. The representation of your heart. And the inextinguishable light which forever guides your actions."

"So, it's like that?"

Ryuko's hand drifted towards her heart. The Keyblade was part of Beatrix? She didn't know how that worked. It had to be magic. Or something she was missing. But for some strange reason, it made perfect sense. Because the way Beatrix talked about Save the Queen, how she held the Keyblade, reminded her of Senketsu. Of everything she and him went through at Honnouji Academy. Fighting Satsuki. Gamagori and the others. Dealing with Nui Harime and dear old mom. All of that. Maybe because things were so different, if she closed her eyes and looked deep in her heart, she could still hear Senketsu's voice.

His last words as she desperately tried saving him.

The pain in his voice.

She could never forget that.

"... just like Senketsu."

"Bearing the Keyblade isn't an easy decision."

Beatrix's footsteps depressed the grass as she turned around, elegant armor once more gracing her figure. She heard Ryuko speak. Listening to the final word. An unfamiliar expression that she nevertheless memorized. And then, snapping her arm to the right, allowed Save the Queen to fall from her fingers. The Keyblade transforming in an explosion of gold and pink light, "Don't take it lightly."

Her boot touched the glider hovering barely a foot above the ground before she threw her weight forward, vaulting until she was straddling the transformed Keyblade. As the humming of pink energy pulsing from the concave wings rushed across the grassy field, Beatrix grasped the twin handles. Her fingers settling into a position as intimately familiar as the day she earned the privilege of bearing the Keyblade, "I've spoken with Steiner."

The glider remained unmoving when she shifted her center of balance, sparing Ryuko one last glance, "If you accept my offer, come to Alexandria Castle. He'll be waiting for you."

Ryuko didn't say anything when Beatrix took off.

She watched the woman fly towards the setting sun. The corners of her mouth twitched into a strained grimace when the transformed Keyblade suddenly shot upwards at a nearly ninety-degree angle. And when Beatrix finally disappeared into whatever laid outside the world, darkness or space or whatever, leaving behind nothing but some fancy fireworks, Ryuko finally remembered *why* she was here. *Why* she'd spent the last ten minutes getting the crap beaten out of her.

"You knew this was going to happen, didn't you?"

Stroking his beard, Yen Sid marveled at the unexcepted development. A trace of surprise flashed across his widened eyes. And with more than a little bewilderment, grunted, "Beatrix's standards are exceptionally high. Even among her fellow masters, she strives towards perfection. If anyone could accurately gauge

your strength, the limits of your abilities, it would be Beatrix. However, I must confess. When she offered you the chance of apprenticeship, I was just as astonished as you. She is, as you might think, quite difficult to please.”

Several choice words appeared in the darkest depths of Ryuko’s mind. Some perfectly suited to answer. But she settled on something a little less controversial, “Tell me about it.”

“But as you’ve no doubt realized, Beatrix is considered one of the strongest Keyblade masters in the realm of light for good reason.”

The sorcerer folded his arms, bushy eyebrows furrowed not from frustration, but opportunity. He’d expected Beatrix to recommend another master. But her decision to supplement her duties by offering Ryuko the unexpected chance at apprenticeship came as no small surprise, “Underneath her tutelage, you will obtain the strength necessary to travel between worlds and find your friends and sister. To lay to rest your doubts and concerns. But the choice, as always, remains yours. I will not force you to accept Beatrix’s offer. Nor will I punish your decision to reject it.”

“Tch! That’s not really a choice!”

She barely restrained the subsequent curse, “Because it sounds like you’re saying I won’t find Satsuki and Mako unless I say yes!”

“Hmm...”

Anxiety plagued his mind as he pondered the teenager’s frustration. A storm of emotions which necessitated listening to his heart. Counseling not with the stars, but with his own heart and memories. And, after but a moment’s contemplation, Yen Sid nodded, “Forgive me, Ryuko. In retrospect, it appears the decision wasn’t truly a decision at all. So please, allow me to put your concerns to rest.”

He unfolded his arms, tone softening alongside his expression, “Even if you reject Beatrix’s offer, I will search the realm for survivors

from your world. Your decision won't influence my efforts. You have my word."

"You'll really do that?"

Ryuko wanted to believe Yen Sid. But an offer like Beatrix's doesn't just appear out of nowhere. Her hand clenched into a fist, fingernails almost breaking the skin as she thought about everything. Maybe she fought Beatrix instead of talking. And it wasn't until she was a bleeding mess on the ground, barely able to stand, that the woman decided to chitchat and finally introduce herself. But she knew, deep down in some weird place, that Beatrix wasn't spontaneous. Everything was probably planned from the beginning. Which meant Yen Sid brought her to this world knowing she'd get the crap beaten out of her!

Anger circulated through her heart before abruptly dissipating.

With a grimace, more from embarrassment than frustration, she swallowed the vile bitterness.

Maybe she was overthinking things. This wouldn't be the first time she believed something to be true only to have the truth forcefully shoved down her throat. Beatrix was arrogant and didn't hold anything back. Not even her insults. But since waking up in Lindblum, everybody she's met, everybody she's talked to, offered help. The innkeeper. Mickey. Cid. And now Yen Sid. They all wanted to help her find Satsuki and Mako. None of them got angry when she lashed out about things that weren't their fault. Blamed them for things they couldn't do anything to stop.

Why the hell would Beatrix be any different?

"Fine, I guess I got no choice."

She stomped across the field. Moving around was the best way to clear her mind. And with everything that happened, she had a *lot* of tension. The last thing she wanted to do was snap at Yen Sid. But

something the guy, or maybe it was Beatrix, mentioned was bothering her. Scratching her cheek, Ryuko stopped walking, turned around, and jabbed a thumb against her jacket, "Hang on! If the Keyblade is so important to traveling around this place, how does Cid's invention work? And I'm not new to weird and messed-up stuff, so unless you stuffed one up your sleeve, you dragged me away from Lindblum using magic. Not the Keyblade."

"An astute observation."

Despite his well-deserved reputation, Yen Sid was impressed by the deduction, "Several methods exist for traveling between worlds. Some are quite dangerous. Others, such as Regent Cid's breakthrough, possess limitations. And yet others, such as magic, require months, if not years, of diligent study. Therefore, for someone in a bit of a hurry, utilizing the Keyblade is the safest method for exploring the realm of light in a short amount of time."

"Months, huh?"

Instead of ignoring the boring information about magic, Ryuko thought long and hard about the eventual payoff. Even if Yen Sid was exaggerating about the difficulty to build suspense or something equally annoying, she wasn't confident about her studying habits. Because she *hated* studying. It was the most boring thing in the world. But even if she buckled down to read boring, dusty books until her eyes bled, it would take weeks before anything interesting happened. And that still wouldn't help because, like Yen Sid just said, she needed to already visit a world before teleporting.

Bringing her right back to square one!

"Beatrix said the Keyblade comes from the heart," she gave the Scissor Blade an experimental swing, "But I'm guessing there's a bit more, right?"

"Many people desire the Keyblade. Far more than you might realize."

With the words clinging to the air, Yen Sid watched the sun setting upon the horizon. Even after many decades, he remained fascinated by such things. Entranced with an almost childish sense of wonder. Each world was different. Some more than others. And yet, they all shared common ancestry. Remained connected despite the physical barriers separating them, “The Bequeathing looks beyond physical ability or magical prowess. By allowing their prospective student to hold the Keyblade, a master tests the strength of their heart. Determining if they are worthy of inheriting such dangerous power.”

“Huh...”

She still had no clue what a Bequeathing was. Still, everything Yen Sid said made sense if the Keyblade really was that picky. In a weird, messed-up fashion. But before she could ask the only important question on her mind, like how to pass the test, the sorcerer interrupted the silence.

“I’ve known Beatrix for many years.”

A ghost of a smile pulled upon the corners of Yen Sid’s mouth, “Since she was an apprentice to her own master. Beatrix would never have offered you the opportunity of apprenticeship if she weren’t already convinced you were worthy to bear the Keyblade.”

Ryuko tried remaining calm. She really did. Maybe it was because things were moving fast. Or Beatrix, who kicked her ass without breaking a sweat, suddenly wanted to train her. But getting a Keyblade somehow didn’t feel right. Finding a way home - or better yet, Satsuki and Mako while teaching that masked freak a lesson - shouldn’t be this easy. An opportunity this perfect doesn’t appear out of freaking nowhere. Not without a price. But here it was.

And she wasn’t going to ignore what might be the best chance she’d ever get.

“... alright. I think I get what you’re saying.”

Propping the Scissor Blade against her shoulders, she stared Yen Sid squarely in the eyes. Took a deep breath. And then smirked, “I still don’t like it. But I’m willing to give this whole Keyblade thing a shot.”

Yen Sid stroked his beard at Ryuko’s declaration, the faintest resemblance of a smile confessing his satisfaction and pride, “Very well. Now, with the matter settled, I believe it’s time we returned to Lindblum. There’s much to do before you’re prepared to meet Beatrix for training. After all, Regent Cid has begun wondering why you haven’t yet collected your reward for standing against Ardyn Lucis Caelum.”

It felt like someone poured cold water in her head.

There was a reward for getting her ass kicked by that smug bastard? Her mouth opened and closed several times. The corner of her right eye twitched. Her room was nice, but Cid had promised her a place to stay *before* Ardyn appeared out of freaking nowhere. And that moogle made her new threads, free of charge, because she acted as a punching bag long enough for Yen Sid to save everyone. But money? An actual reward? Blinking once, then twice in rapid succession, she gawked owlshly. Then shouted at the top of her lungs.

“I get a freaking reward!?”

Unknown Report 3

Unknown Report 3

“Fancy meeting you here!”

The air was thick and choked with dust, turning the friendly greeting into something ominous. Whirlwinds carried the musty scent of ancient magic and terrible secrets across the barren wasteland. As he sauntered towards the only other living being on the sunset world with an obvious swagger to his step, Ardyn Lucis Caelum’s mouth was drawn into a tight, introspective frown. Darkness clung to his clothing. It wafted from his very existence. And then, with a wet smack of his lips, pivoted upon his heel, arms extended into an amiable gesture.

“Of course, you *people* always find yourselves drawn to this world, don’t you?”

Feigned empathy clung to his tongue, “This... terrible... reminder of that awful, senseless war. Hundreds of innocent children slaughtered by their friends and comrades. What nightmares must exist. Just *waiting* to be heard by those knowledgeable to their secrets...”

A pair of amber eyes narrowed, “Do you seek something?”

The man, hunched from age and countless confrontations, stared at the dusty crags stretching into the horizon, “Regent Cid survived your retribution. Lindblum remains intact. And my brethren discovered the process Garland Lucis Caelum used to seal your heart beneath Lindblum.”

“Now isn’t *that* interesting.”

Ardyn stomped against the ground, sending out a wave of dust, “Why, unless I’m wrong, you knew I wouldn’t succeed.”

“One must always anticipate the possibility of failure,” the man’s gravelly voice devolved into a mirthless chuckle, countering the malevolent humor clinging to Ardyn Lucis Caelum’s heart. Stroking his goatee, he stared into the depths of the crater inches from his boot. Yen Sid’s caution and hesitation were well-known. His reluctance to appear presumptuous easily manipulated. Yet the sorcerer acted far quicker than anticipated. Haste born from concern for his impetuous apprentice, who arrived on Lindblum despite his master’s orders. Throwing an unforeseen wrench in his plans.

“Unexpected developments are the cornerstone of evolution,” he clenched his hand into a fist, the white glove crinkling from the strain, “No matter the odds. Surely, such a fact should have been known to someone of your experience, Ardyn Lucis Caelum.”

An ominous wind blew across the desolate landscape, carrying the faintest hint of darkness as interest shimmered in the depths of the man’s amber eyes, “You were confronted by three individuals. Mickey, the impetuous apprentice of Yen Sid. Gilgamesh, infamous collector of legendary weapons. And -”

“... and the *girl*.”

Ardyn’s deep voice interrupted the elderly man, “An otherwise ordinary girl...”

A hiss of breath comparable to a chuckle passed through pursed lips. Already pale skin temporarily turned alabaster as he gripped the brim of his fedora, the smirk gracing his daemoniac features turning monstrous, “... who proved quite the thorn in my side.”

“The girl, you say?”

The man’s waning interest concerning Ardyn Lucis Caelum’s failure reversed directions. Obtaining a genuine hint of curiosity. He, of course, knew of the girl. Or rather, that she played a crucial role in preventing the regent’s untimely death. Yet beyond that cursory information, details were limited. The girl’s name, her abilities,

potential weapons or even the strength of her heart. None of that was known. Yen Sid, not for the first time, succeeded in keeping something secret. And with Beatrix having taken the girl under her wing and Gilgamesh long since vanished into the Lanes Between, his options going forward were limited.

“Curious...”

He folded his arms behind his back, knuckles pressed together, as the darkness defining Ardyn’s existence manifested, “If Yen Sid’s apprentice and Gilgamesh posed no threat towards your plans, how could this one girl? Such a feat of strength seems... shall I begrudgingly confess... impossible for an ordinary girl, no matter the circumstances, to achieve.”

“Ah, but this girl was quite extraordinary.”

Ardyn knew *exactly* what the man sought. With that thought in mind, he raised a finger, grinning as the wind blowing through the forsaken world gusted into a tempest, “She possessed strength and endurance far beyond the limitations of flesh and blood. Capable of regenerating wounds to the point death itself might never take her. She remained conscious despite my efforts and cutting her life short. All without magic. She was, one might so eagerly imply, the furthest *thing* from normal.”

“Ah, there’s something else. A piece of information you, of all people, will find most interesting...”

The ambient lighting over the ancient battlefield dimmed when Ardyn raised another finger, “The girl’s heart contained an extraordinary amount of darkness. But more intriguing, this darkness exists alongside a strange light. One both brilliant... and disturbingly dark.”

At *that* little tidbit, Ardyn noticed the elderly man’s eyes narrow.

“Yet her power isn’t drawn from it,” wagging both of his fingers, Ardyn chuckled before turning around, one boot scraping against the

ground, "The darkness festers in her heart waiting to be unleashed. But the girl ignores its existence. She refuses to acknowledge her true nature. Limiting herself to something she's not."

"I see..."

The man stepped forward with those words, bringing himself to the outer cusp of the crater.

He couldn't help but appreciate the irony. His plans revolved around Ardyn Lucis Caelum assassinating Cid Fabool the Ninth and throwing Lindblum into chaos. Yet here, reminiscing about the ramifications of that particular failure, did the foundations for success reveal itself. Despite the man's affable presentation, Ardyn's heart pulsed with darkness. It defined his existence. While he could never approach the girl without drawing Beatrix's suspicion - and obtaining her undivided attention was the furthest thing from his mind - several other paths remained.

"This girl..."

His eyes narrowed alongside feigned hesitation, "... what was her name?"

"I'm afraid she's already taken."

Ardyn smirked while nonchalantly ignoring the elderly man's question, "You see, the girl interfered with my long-awaited retribution. She allowed the regent to escape. The mouse and swordsman were troublesome. But *she* was the catalyst. The one who denied my dreams. And that cannot stand. I care not about your plans. Whatever they may be. But take note. The girl will suffer the consequences for her interference. Yet it will be upon my terms. Not yours."

"Hmph," a Keyblade appeared in the man's gloved hand, "Is that a threat, Ardyn Lucis Caelum?"

“Consider it...”

Ardyn's lips smacked together, “... *friendly* advice, from one connoisseur of darkness to another. For, in light of my recent failure, I've settled upon another course of action.”

In one smooth motion, he stepped towards the other man. With his reddish hair shifting in the dust-filled wind, he reached up, casually removing the fedora gracing his features, “How much do you know about the realm of darkness? About the monsters lurking where the hearts of men refuse to wander? The hellish chaos created by those who've fallen into darkness's embrace?”

There was silence. Nothing reached their ears but the whistling of the decayed wind through the rusted remains of long-abandoned Keyblades. The darkness born from the ancient being manifested into a thick, nauseating miasma. Greyish-black flames enveloped his body. His skin paled to a disturbing alabaster as darkness oozed from every orifice. Holding the fedora against his chest, Ardyn genuflected, menace clinging to his smirking lips.

“You wished for the girl's name, correct?”

A portal of rippling darkness spun into existence behind Ardyn as he replaced the stylish accessory once more upon his head. Pivoting with his fingers still grasping the fedora, he turned to leave the desolate world. Yet, at the last possible moment, with one foot inside the shadows, glanced over his shoulder at the elderly man, “Ryuko. A rather interesting name, wouldn't you agree?”

The man allowed the Keyblade to disappear once Ardyn Lucis Caelum departed.

“Ryuko...”

He repeated the strange name. Allowed the pronunciation to roll off his tongue. It truly was an interesting and peculiar name. With delight shimmering in his amber eyes, he clasped his arms behind his back.

He hunched forward, gazing across the ancient battlefield, “I cannot help but believe your interference was preordained. Yet, even so, destiny is something never left to chance. It may be some time, but eventually we’ll meet. And I will bear witness to the strength which tempered Ardyn Lucis Caelum’s dark ambitions.”

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Chapter 3.6

“It *really* is her!”

Ryuko’s eyebrow twitched.

Taking a deep breath, she settled on the stone wall overlooking the fountain, arms tightly folded across her chest. What the hell was wrong with people not minding their own freaking business? With her mouth pursed into a grimace, more from long-building frustration than the annoyance of having to listen to several idiots talk behind her back, she irritably bounced her sneaker against the ground. God damn it, the humidity was freaking disgusting! Rubbing a hand against her face, Ryuko grumbled. Then cursed in the back of her throat, refraining from saying anything *too* vulgar.

An hour.

She’d been sitting in the sweltering sun for more than an hour waiting for the Steiner guy to arrive.

“Ugh! Where the hell is he?”

Even with the breeze from the fountain, Ryuko felt sweat trickling down her neck. Why the hell did she have to wait here? The hustle and bustle of Alexandria was preferable to sitting around in the blistering sun.

“... me? Why me? You ask her!”

Ryuko strummed her fingers against the inside of her arm.

“... I mean, look at her!”

Her mouth twitched alongside her eyebrow. The scabbard holding the Scissor Blade, something she bought in Lindblum using a little of the reward money, scraping against the ground as she pulled her

foot backwards. Making sure it was as loud and threatening as physically possible. As her eye continued twitching and she *heard* one of the people whisper underneath their breath, Ryuko shuffled until she found the one spot where the wall wasn't digging into her back and *tried* focusing on something more important.

Like the Keyblade.

Instead, she found herself thinking about that weird and messed-up nightmare.

"Damn it..."

The more she thought about things, the more nothing made sense. Huffing angrily, she blew away the bang of crimson bobbing above her left eye. She couldn't remember more than a few bits and pieces. But since getting her ass kicked by Ardyn, certain things were coming back. Important things. Boring things. Strange chunks of confusing memories. Stuff involving a man wearing a hooded coat. A guy who spoke in annoying riddles and gave off a really bad vibe.

Ryuko shook her head and groaned.

That didn't make any sense. It was just a freaking dream. A nightmare from eating too much food. She was probably just filling in the gaps with other memories. Like when she deluded herself into thinking Satsuki killed their dad instead of Nui Harime. Her eyes trailed downwards at the painful memory. That wasn't a mistake she would repeat. Not in a million years

But this time felt different.

Right down to the fancy hood and zipper dangling from the front, the enigmatic guy from her dream and Ardyn Izunia had worn the same black coat.

"Ugh! This doesn't make any freaking sense!"

She angrily slammed her head against the fountain. That couldn't be right! It had to be a coincidence! Dreams can't predict the future! As Mako always said, dreams were nothing more than choppy home movies.

But that didn't explain why her hands trembled.

Or why, despite her best efforts, they refused to *stop*.

Ryuko pressed her tongue against the roof of her mouth. She grabbed her knee, pulling her leg backwards until pressed against her chest. Maybe she was remembering everything from her dream wrong. Maybe she was putting unrelated memories together. But there was something else she remembered besides the strange guy. A single black-and-white image floating on the edge of her heart. Something just out of reach yet tantalizingly close.

She *remembered* fighting something in that weird nightmare. Gremlins. Monsters made from darkness with glowing yellow eyes and razor-sharp claws. She remembered fighting them with the Scissor Blade. Killing them without breaking a sweat.

Only to accomplish jack-shit in the real world.

"... you think she used that blade against him?"

"Enough already!"

Her sneaker stomped upon the ground. Rubber slapping against stone with a loud *thump*.

Her sneaker slammed against the ground with a loud *thump*. The never-ending commentary in the background was the final straw. The breaking point after a miserable morning. Without another word, Ryuko leapt to her feet. She threw herself off the wall. Almost stumbling before catching her balance. And with her foot propped underneath the Scissor Blade, viciously glared at the source of her frustration, "If you have something say, then say it to my face!"

An embarrassed noise escaped the guard's mouth before she jabbed the knight in the ribs.

"If it's not too much trouble..."

Fidgeting in place, the sole of her boot twisting in place, the guard swallowed the lump in her throat, "... could we have your autograph?"

"Huh?"

Ryuko had *no* idea what to think. Her mind was thrown through a loop by the strange question. Autograph? They wanted *her* autograph? She had no idea how to respond to something so ridiculous. It made no sense. Nobody ever asked for her autograph. Unable to muster the conscious effort to speak, she stood there, head cocked sideways and mouth slightly ajar as her confused mind attempted to process the question.

The name's Weimar, sir! Umm... ma'am! Not sir! Ma'am!"

Almost hitting himself in the face, sweat dripped from the knight's chin when he snapped an awkward, yet enthusiastic, salute, "It's an honor to meet you, ma'am!"

Her mouth twitched once. Then a second time. A groan left her throat. But being called ma'am... or anything respectful like that... was enough to bring everything into focus. Taking a step away from Weimar, Ryuko gagged at the sweaty knight's breath, which smelled like someone left rotting Gysahl Pickles out in the sun, "Quit it with the stupid formalities! I'm not a ma'am! Or anything close to it!"

"Right! Sorry, ma'am!"

Weimar nervously spun around, jogging on the spot, while his heart leapt into his throat, "It's just... you're the Hero of Lindblum! You helped Master Yen Sid save the world from that villain! You're Master Beatrix's apprentice! One of the few people who gained her respect!

You're basically a legend! That's why... I mean, if it's not too much trouble for a great hero like you..."

The piece of paper in his hand trembled, "... could we have your autograph?"

Ryuko *still* didn't know what to think.

"Uh... sure... I guess?"

This was the first time anyone asked for her autograph. The closest thing to an autograph she could remember was helping Mako sign the shit-ton of paperwork Gamagori had them fill out for the Fight Club. Utterly confused, the corners of her mouth twitched as her eyes glazed over. She stared at the piece of paper in the knight's hand. Saw the eager nervousness and terror in his eyes. Like he was afraid she'd tear him apart for saying the wrong thing.

Clank! Clank! Clank!

"What are you doing? Get back to work!"

"Clank! Clank! Clank!"

"Uh... sorry, sir! Forgive me, sir!"

Steiner double-timed it.

But that wasn't enough.

His face was etched into incomprehensible frustration when he arrived in the courtyard seconds after Weimar retreated towards the western tower. Gasping for breath, winded from the blistering heat, Steiner leaned on the fountain for balance. And with the cool breeze from the rushing water on his skin, begrudgingly gave up the chase. Curses! He taught his men too well! By the time he caught his breath and resumed the chase, Weimar would have already reached his hidden sanctuary. The single location in Alexandria he'd never discovered.

An infuriating blemish on his record!

“You there!”

He pointed at the remaining guard, “You must know where he went! Tell me this instant!”

“I don’t know,” the guard scratched her cheek, “He said it was a secret.”

Clank!

Steiner’s mouth fell open from shock. He couldn’t believe his ears. Enraged, he shook his fist at the guard, daring her to utter another word of insolence, “I am the captain of the Knights of Pluto! Through the authority granted unto me by Her Majesty, tell me where he went or face the consequences!”

“Umm... in that case, I really don’t know.”

Clank! Clank!

“I don’t have time for this!”

His armor *clanked* as he hurried down the side path. If he was lucky, Weimar would be hiding around the corner. But there was nothing. Only the deafening silence of insects and birds mocking his failure. It was infuriating! But with some reluctance, Steiner shambled back into the courtyard, patience frayed to the point his hands shook. Confound it! Did Weimar have every guard in the castle under his blasted spell? Huffing at the disturbing thought, he collapsed onto the wall above the fountain, anxiety coursing through his heart.

Of all the days for the Knights of Pluto to miss morning attendance.

“Darn it!”

He hunched forward, arms propped upon his knees, “What do I do? She’s probably long gone by now...”

“Hey! You that Steiner guy?”

The unfamiliar voice pulled him back to reality. For a moment, just a few seconds, he was confused. Could she be a visitor? A guest? He tried remembering if anyone besides Beatrix’s apprentice was due to arrive this day. After all, the Queen was always busy with important royal matters. Then concern overwhelmed confusion. In his frustration, he’d almost ignored a potentially serious breach of security. And so soon after recovering Excalibur from that multi-armed criminal! But, upon closer inspection, the girl didn’t look like a thief. She certainly didn’t act like one. If she *were* a criminal, she would have fled the moment he arrived.

Clank!

Mouth set into a firm grimace, he adjusted his helmet. With sweat beading down his face, Steiner stood up, preparing himself for the journey ahead. Now wasn’t the time to worry about unknown possibilities! The priority was finding Beatrix’s apprentice! Due to his inexcusable tardiness, she probably returned to Lindblum. Or, if he was fortunate, was walking through the town in search of nourishment.

“If you’re seeking an appointment with the Queen, please speak with one of the guards.”

His armor *clanked* as he turned away from the teenager, “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to locate a very important guest!”

“So, you’re *not* Steiner?”

He opened his mouth to answer.

Then stopped.

“Unaccompanied visitors are strictly forbidden on castle grounds!”

It required a moment for his mind to process the situation. That anyone daring to trespass would taunt him so brazenly defied belief! It was audacious! Pivoting sharply with one more screeching *clank* of armor scraping against itself, Steiner pointed at the teenager, arms shaking from indignation, "Where is your escort?"

"Uh... nobody said anything about an escort."

Ryuko didn't know where to start. This guy was really loud. Emotional about every little thing. And for some stupid, messed-up reason, thought she was a criminal. Who the hell thought someone was a criminal just because they stood around doing nothing? Wait a freaking second! She knew *exactly* how to deal with this guy! She snorted under her breath. And gathering her annoyance until it settled deep in her heart, pointed over her shoulder at the gondola. Or rather, the guard trying not to sweat in the blistering heat, "What's the big deal? I gave her my name."

Staring right into the guy's eyes, she straightened her posture. And then stabbed both hands into her jacket, "But if you're gonna be like this, I guess I could leave. It's not like I'm doing anything important today."

Clank!

"Why you -"

The declaration faltered on the tip of Steiner's tongue when he noticed the weapon beneath the teenager's sneaker. Its peculiar appearance gave him pause. And for but a brief moment his entire body froze. Muscles locking into place. How intriguing. The girl's rudeness was inexcusable but there was no doubting her sword was one-of-a-kind. He'd never seen anything quite like it. Under different circumstances he would have inquired about its origins.

But now wasn't the time to think about such things!

And yet, something about the blade reminded him of Beatrix. Or rather, their conversation just yesterday. She'd been preparing to leave Alexandria for the Realm of Departure and then several other worlds. But she made certain to describe everything about her apprentice.

Including the scissor-like weapon she wielded against -

"My apologies!"

Without delaying another second, Steiner straightened his posture. How thoughtless of him! As the captain of the Knights of Pluto, an experienced veteran of Her Majesty's forces, he shouldn't have required a burst of inspiration to recognize Ryuko. Nor to put the pieces together. She was identical to Beatrix's description right down to the crimson bang of hair falling over her left eye. To not only arrive more than an hour late, for reasons that weren't *his* fault in the first place, but brush aside Ryuko's protests like she was a common hooligan?

He'd never felt so embarrassed!

"Adelbert Steiner, Captain of the Knights of Pluto!"

He pushed aside the overwhelming shame. Pushed through the embarrassment to focus on the matter at hand! Stomping his feet together, the slightly-rusted sabatons *clanking*, Steiner snapped his arm into a salute, "As the Hero of Lindblum, you deserve better than baseless suspicion. However, this mistake could have been avoided had you simply introduced yourself at the beginning!"

"Uh... sorry?"

A flock of birds left the nearby trees when Ryuko realized *what* Steiner actually said, "HEY! What the hell's that supposed to mean? You're the one who got all suspicious!"

Clank!

Steiner's expression changed in a heartbeat. Scratching his chin, the stubble faintly visible in the blistering sun, he stared across the placid waters surrounding the castle at the familiar skyline, "Due to her duties, Beatrix won't return for another week. Therefore, I've been granted permission to physically prepare you for the countless challenges you'll face throughout your adventures!"

"So, we're gonna fight, huh?"

Ryuko's lips quirked into a vicious smirk as she stomped her sneaker against the ground. Catching the handle of the Scissor Blade underneath her heel, she waited until the count of two before reaching out, fingers curling around the hardened Life Fiber blade spinning through the air, "Alright! Let's do this!"

"Hmph! Nonsense!"

The captain of the Knights of Pluto grimaced at how Ryuko gripped the Scissor Blade, "It's obvious you've never learned how to properly hold a sword!"

"Say way?"

"Your feet are spread too wide. If I were so inclined, I could knock you over without lifting my own blade," Steiner pointed at Ryuko's left foot. And when she dragged it closer to her center of balance, perhaps hoping that was the only problem, cleared his throat before continuing, "Furthermore, there are several things wrong with your grip! A swordsman of proficient ability could disarm you without much trouble. Like so!"

In one blindingly swift motion, he knocked the Scissor Blade from Ryuko's fingers. And then waved the crimson weapon in her face, "If you wish to wield the Keyblade, you're going to relearn everything from scratch! Starting with the basics!"

"Tch!"

Ryuko balked at the suggestion. Was he suggesting she was nothing more than amateur? She kicked plenty of ass with the Scissor Blade. Including Satsuki. Who got lessons from some asshole paid by their bitch of a mom. Scoffing out the side of her mouth, she took back the Scissor Blade. And, after making sure the bastard's rusty armor didn't somehow scratch the metal, snarled, "I just wasn't ready for you, is all! But..."

Something *hurt* deep in her heart.

"... I guess you got a point."

She couldn't understand why those words hurt so much. It wasn't like they were hard to admit. On the contrary, she *wanted* to get stronger. Because getting stronger was the only thing that mattered. Once she had the Keyblade, she could begin searching for Satsuki and Mako. Even if Yen Sid promised to help, this was something she wanted to do. Something she *had* to do. It didn't matter if there were hundreds of worlds. Or even thousands. And the thought of fighting more of those shadow monsters didn't bother her. She didn't care about useless crap like that!

Nothing was going to stand in her way!

Her mouth opened and closed, breathless words almost passing through her lips, before Ryuko settled on exactly what she wanted to say, "Even if it means buckling down and learning everything from scratch, I'm gonna do whatever it takes to get stronger!"

"Very well! Your training begins immediately!"

"... huh?"

Clank! Clank!

Turning around, his armor clanking from the sudden momentum, Steiner pointed forward, ignorant of the confused outburst, "It won't

be easy! But from sunrise to sunset, you're going to learn proper swordsmanship!"

"Great..."

Ryuko's mouth twitched.

She could sense how much her life was about to suck. If Steiner was anything like Gamagori, the next few days were going to be torture. A living hell worse than anything she had ever experienced. But a breathless, almost miserable, laugh passed through her mouth. And with half of her face twitching, she reluctantly followed the guy. It was too late to back out. This is what she wanted. To get the Keyblade. It was her choice. Nobody else's. But despite telling herself that, Ryuko shuffled after the knight, regret dripping from her voice.

"... just freaking great."

Chapter 4.1

Don't Lose Your Way

Chapter 4 - Blues Drive Monster

Thirteen Days Later

"Halt, thief!"

A cluster of arrows left scars in the wall next to Gilgamesh as he slid around the corner, fingers dragging against the ground. With sweat trickling down his cheeks, he quickly recovered his momentum, all six arms pumping vigorously until they were nothing but blurs of motion. He gasped for breath as the footsteps grew closer. His lungs screamed for oxygen, something magic couldn't provide. Yet not once, not for a second, did he consider stopping.

And contrary to what several witnesses might have thought they heard, did *not* whimper like a little girl when a silver lance nearly sliced open his stomach.

"Aw, come on!"

With the latest near-death experience already a distant memory, Gilgamesh hurdled the approaching guard. Embarrassing? Yes. For the guard, not him. And as the axe... sword... strange weapon carved through the air, missing his feet but catching the dust clinging to his scarf, he briefly locked eyes with the pillar of solid muscle. It sent shivers down his spine. Right as he landed on the ground, kicked one foot backwards and sent the guard crashing into the temporarily disarmed lancer.

"You can't stop me that easily!"

The taunt almost seemed pointless as he drifted around another corner. Ha! These fools would never catch him! With the naginata in

his middle right hand still unused, Gilgamesh snuck a quick peek at the sheathed blade on his waist. Even with the threads wrapped around the golden scabbard preventing him from drawing the blade, he could sense the legendary power dwelling within! A sword equivalent in posterity to Excalibur! It was finally his! He should be excited! Full of confidence! Basking in the glory of another successful adventure!

Yet he couldn't shake the feeling he was forgetting something.

"Kiss your ass goodbye!"

Ah yeas, the obnoxious sharpshooter.

"Humph! I applaud your efforts..."

Gilgamesh shifted his center of balance just as the irritating sniper took another pot shot. He may be confident in victory - or, err, escape - but this back and forth banter was losing its luster. There were better things to do with his time. And pointless distractions were downright annoying! Particularly on a tight schedule. And then it happened. Pivoting sharply on his right foot, he glanced at his heart, then the arrowguns aimed towards it and back at his heart. Right before sweeping the naginata in his middle right hand downwards.

Releasing a crescent wave of thunder magic which shattered the approaching hailstorm of glowing arrows.

"... but you're not good enough to be my chosen rival!"

He released a boisterous, yet entirely friendly, chuckle at the sharpshooter's bewilderment. A well-deserved laugh. Amusement, however, that vanished when the lancer and axe-wielder leapt through the dissipating smoke. Oh, come on! They weren't going to give him even a second to catch his breath? Immediately pivoting back around, aware of the pain undoubtedly coming his way if the three stooges caught him, Gilgamesh pumped his arms faster than humanly possible. Electricity crackled between his boots and the

floor, providing the necessary friction as he leaned sideways, drifting around another sharp turn in the hallway.

Allowing him to gawk at the unexpected crowd standing in his way.

"Pardon me! Excuse me, ma'am... err, sir? Move it or lose it!"

To his credit and honor, he didn't crash face-first into the scientists, guards and silver haired young boy standing between himself and freedom. It was quite the miracle. A true testament of strength. An expression of his innate talent as the greatest swordsman in the realm of light. Which, if his ears weren't deceiving him, the knuckleheads lacked.

"Ha!"

He chuckled behind the crimson scarf at the translucent barrier at the end of the corridor. Ah yes, the Hollow Bastion security system. A good obstacle for any average thief. But several bounding strides, energy flowing through his muscles, oxygen filling his lungs with newfound potential, and one scoff later, Gilgamesh planted his boot on the edge of the platform and *vaulted* across the bottomless chasm that was the castle's lift station hub.

"Here we go!"

With a loud *thud*, his boot connected with wall. And then *stuck* to the surface. Ah, magic. Was there anything it couldn't do? Tightening his hold upon the naginata and legendary blade liberated from the royal equivalent of a fancy museum, the latter thrumming with possibility, Gilgamesh sprinted up the lift station wall, moving faster and faster when the guards finally untangled themselves.

It was in the middle of that thought when an arrow shattered inches from his thigh.

"He's quite tenacious!"

One final pivot... one last flexing of his legs... and he was soaring across the massive pit stretching from the basement to the tallest tower of the castle. Tucking both legs firmly against his chest, scarf and cloak fluttering in the internal breeze, he took careful aim. He waited until the appropriate time. And stomping his feet, all six arms braced for impact, he landed on the ground floor station, not a scratch on his body. And more importantly, on his armor! Practice truly did make perfect. Now all he needed to do was finish his grand escape.

Freedom was just -

BANG!

An arrow whistled dangerously close to his temple.

"Now that's simply not fair!"

Infinite magical ammunition was the very definition of cheating! What happened to reloading and bullets and other common problems? Grumbling at the change in fortune which begot a decrease in his overall chances of escaping, Gilgamesh rolled forward, temporarily placing himself out of harm's reach. And without further prompting from any unnecessary persistent guards, fled the lift station as fast as his feet could move.

"... almost... there..."

As the interior glow of magical lighting gave way to beautiful sunlight filtering through stained-glass windows, he effortlessly vaulted over the fountain. Of course, it would have been easier taking the stairs. But that was boring! Pedantic! Taking the easy route had no style! No finesse! How could anyone remember him, the Great Gilgamesh, if he behaved akin to an annoying coward?

"MWAHAHAHA!!!"

With flamboyance and practiced grace, he leaned backwards, avoiding the massive chandelier by the skin of his chin. This was his moment of triumph! After weeks of planning, victory was almost in his grasp. Nothing remained but making a clean escape, leaving this world and the three stooges behind to lament their loss!

"FOOLS! You faced the mightiest swordsman in the realm of light! You faced ME! Gilga -"

His foot slipped on the waxed floor, sending him - armor, weapons and introduction - skidding in the wall next to the front door.

"Well... well... well..."

With one arrowgun bouncing against his shoulder and the other dangling from his fingers, the sharpshooter watched Gilgamesh lose his footing courtesy of the patch of ice that appeared right before he landed. Sure, he wasn't the *best* at magic. Some people might say he sucked. But a little ice... some flames... maybe a spark of lightning? Stuff like that was simple. And boy, did playing against common misconceptions work to his advantage.

"You know..."

The sniper stopped at the bottom of the stairs, "... for a - what's the word - thief, you really aren't that good."

"Humph!"

Gilgamesh bristled. The nerve of this man! Did this sharpshooter think such pedantic repartee was worthy of retort? Bah! He heard wittier remarks from chocobos. And similar to that embarrassing incident, which he would never mention again, he knew just what to say, "You people should be thanking me!"

Slapping one pair of hands against the ground on either side of his head, he effortlessly launched himself into a front flip. With the amateurish guard bewildered by his mobility, not to mention

masterful dexterity, he vaulted onto his feet, dust settling from his well-worn armor, "To allow a blade of such magnificence go unused..."

His train of thought momentarily disembarked when the remaining stooges appeared upon the balcony. Which was anything but good news. He could sense the annoyance coming from the lancer. And the axe-wielding wall of solid muscle appeared quite a bit less stoic. But with shake of his head to loosen the cobwebs, Gilgamesh pushed the menacing thoughts to the back of his mind. He tightened his hold upon the legendary sword, just in case one of the guards knew some sort of weird magic, before pointing a finger at the sharpshooter.

"Well, it's just wrong! It's not a common collectable! Or even a mail-ordered item! You should be grateful that I, Gilgamesh, master swordsman, shall wield this beautiful sword against powerful monsters and adversaries!"

"You? A master swordsman? As if!"

The sharpshooter waited for his comrades to speak. Or really, to say anything. It certainly would have taken the pressure off. But when they left him hanging, choosing to remain mute like two sticks in the mud, he rolled his eyes, "Anyway, it being a royal treasure and all, I'm afraid Tournesol's not going anywhere."

Click!

"Normally I'd ask you to surrender. Protocol and all that nonsense..."

Click!

Assured the multi-armed swordsman was paying close attention, the sharpshooter raised the identical arrowguns, fingers curled against the triggers, "But thinking you can steal Tournesol from under our nose? Heh... you ain't walking out of this place alive, pal."

Gilgamesh's opinion of the braggart fell several positions.

On the outside, he was the epitome of stoicism. A well-trained façade. He watched the other two stooges without raising an eyebrow, naginata poised to intercept any attacks. But deep in his heart, away from wandering eyes, Gilgamesh was panicking. No! No! No! Darn it! This wasn't how things were supposed to happen! Getting caught... chased through the castle by these annoying rascallions... forced to listen to cheap and pathetic death threats... hadn't been part of his plan!

The royal treasury should have been unguarded!

So, how did this guy foil his masterful escape?

"That's what you think!"

A swirling vortex of shadows materialized beneath his boots. Shifting bands of black, blue and purple materialized from nothingness. It bubbled and hissed, emitted an ominous feeling that caused the sharpshooter to instinctively retreat across the entrance hall. A reaction which brought Gilgamesh an immense amount of amusement. To the casual observer, this ability resembled those fancy Corridors of Darkness used by the morons in black coats.

But this was different!

For instance, it was a pool on the ground instead of a gateway.

And no amount of well-reasoned arguments would convince him otherwise!

"What the -"

Mocking the sniper's unadulterated surprise with well-deserved laughter, Gilgamesh wasted no time leaping into the maelstrom of darkness, "You'll need another lifetime if you desire capturing the magnificent Gilgamesh!"

Not for the first, second or even tenth time since the multi-armed thief mysteriously teleported into the royal treasury, Braig's fingers twitched. It was freaking amazing. He didn't know how Gilgamesh pulled it off. But everything the criminal did - or better yet, pulled out of his ass - was incredibly annoying.

"Screw that!"

Throwing protocols to the wind, he snapped his arms into position, unleashing a full salvo at the fleeing thief. But it was too late. By the time he opened fire, hoping to hit several of the bastard's vital organs, Gilgamesh had already vanished. Scoffing out the side of his mouth, firing on final arrow into the dissipating shadows, Braig expressed his frustration in the only way he knew.

"Gee, thanks for the backup."

As Dilan and Aeus finally decided to make themselves useful, he angrily waved one of his arrowguns, "I could have used some help, you know!"

When neither of them said anything - or, for a lack of a better word, responded - he snorted. Geez, talk about tension. But he couldn't blame them. Well, yeah, he could. Breaking into the royal treasury should have been impossible. It was one of the most heavily-guarded places on the world. Even *he* couldn't waltz into the treasury without getting blasted by magical traps and other nasty surprises.

But as much as Gilgamesh escaping with Tournesol bugged him, that was the least of his worries.

"Hmm..."

Aeus dragged his fingers across the smooth marble tiles, "He's gone."

"Really? What gave it away?"

Ignoring the comment, Aelean continued kneeling for several seconds, eyes trained on the faintest of details. The tips of his gloves turned a faint brown from the thin film of dirt covering the floor. Blue eyes narrowed introspectively, thoughts overlapping in the back of his mind. And after almost half a minute of complete silence, he stood back up, "We must report this incident to His Lordship at once."

"I'll... uh... catch up in a minute."

The identical expressions from Dilan and Aelean almost took the wind out of his sails. Keyword being *almost*. But waving over his shoulder and promising to write their report quickly got them off his back. And once they nodded and turned to leave, he pretended to examine the floor for any clues Aelean might have overlooked. After all, he was one of the best guards on the planet. If anyone could find a missing piece of evidence, it would be him. Yet once he was in the clear, left alone without unwanted supervision, Braig cursed under his breath.

"... goddamn it!"

Out of everything that could possibly have gone wrong, it had to be somebody breaking into the treasury. And now that Gilgamesh proved not only was it possible, but anyone with half a brain could escape into the darkness, Ansem was going to beef up security. It had taken *months* memorizes when his fellow guards took their breaks. Not to mention their patrols and habits. If anything changed, even in the slightest, not only would that hard work have been for nothing, but the chances of Xehanort's grand scheme unfolding without a hitch dropped considerably.

And he did *not* want the blame when the cranky old coot wondered who screwed everything up.

Original Version

| *Thirteen Days Later*

Original Version

“Halt, thief!”

A cluster of arrows left noticeable scars in the wall next to Gilgamesh as he slid around the corner, fingers dragging against the ground. With sweat trickling down his face, he quickly recovered his momentum, all six arms pumping vigorously until they were nothing but blurs of motion. His breath emerged in panting gasps as the footsteps grew closer. Pushing him to hasten his pace. His lungs screamed for oxygen, something magic couldn't provide. Nevertheless, he didn't stop. Didn't let anything stand between himself and the beautiful light at the end of the tunnel.

And contrary to what several witnesses might suggest, did *not* whimper like a scared little girl when a silver lance nearly sliced open his stomach.

“Aw, come on!”

With the near-death experience already forgotten, Gilgamesh cleared the approaching guard in a single bound. The razor-sharp cleaver carved fruitlessly underneath his feet while dust clung to his crimson scarf, which fluttered around his face. And, for but a brief moment, he locked eyes with the axe-wielding pillar of solid muscle. Right before landing on the ground and promptly kicking backwards, sending the guard crashing into the disarmed lancer.

“You can't stop me that easily!”

The taunt almost seemed pointless as he drifted around another corner. Ha! These fools would never catch him! With the naginata in his middle right hand still unused, Gilgamesh snuck an excited glance at the sheathed blade on his waist. Even with the bandages wrapped around the golden scabbard preventing him from drawing the sword, there was no question in his mind. Here he was, legendary sword in hand. A blade nearly the equivalent of Excalibur. He should be exuberant! Full of confidence! Basking in confidence at an adventure well done!

Yet he couldn't shake the feeling he was forgetting something really important.

"Kiss your ass goodbye!"

Ah yes, the obnoxious sharpshooter.

"Humph! I applaud your efforts..."

Gilgamesh shifted his center of balance before the irritating sniper opened fire. As confident in victory as he was, this back-and-forth banter was quickly losing its luster. He was far too busy for further distractions. And pointless confrontations were annoying! Pivoting sharply until he was facing the sharpshooter, who appeared to agree with his assessment, Gilgamesh pushed magic into the *naginata* sweeping over his head.

The razor-sharp blade shimmered with a deep blue glow as he swung downwards.

Releasing a crescent of magic which shattered the dozens upon dozens of approaching arrows.

"... but you're not good enough to be my chosen rival!"

He laughed internally when the sharpshooter was caught in his attack's aftershock. Amusement that vanished as both lancer and axe-wielder appeared out of the smoke, rushing towards him faster than was comfortable. Immediately turning around at the frustration and hatred manifested upon their snarling expressions, Gilgamesh pumped his arms faster than even he thought possible. Forcing himself to stick to the ground as he drifted around another turn in the hallway.

Allowing him to gawk at the crowd of people going about their normal business.

"Pardon me! Excuse me, ma'am!"

To his credit, Gilgamesh didn't crash into the scientists, civilians, random guards or the silver haired young boy standing between himself and freedom. He twisted and danced, moving himself out of embarrassment's way. It was quite the miracle. A true feat of strength. Something made significantly easier due to his immense natural talent. Which, if his ears weren't deceiving him, the three stooges lacked in abundance.

"Humph!"

He frowned beneath his crimson scarf at the translucent barrier at the end of the corridor. The scintillating magic was one of his last obstacles. As his brow furrowed into a determined glower, Gilgamesh took several bounding strides. Energy flowed through his muscles, oxygen filled his lungs with newfound potential, as he planted his boot on the edge of the metallic platform and *vaulted* across the seemingly bottomless chasm containing the castle's lift stations.

"Here we go!"

With a *thump*, his boot connected with intricately designed wall. And then *stuck* to the surface. Glancing across the seemingly bottomless pit, Gilgamesh grimaced at the three stooges rushing towards the lift station. His mouth pursed into a disturbed sneer at their expressions promising endless pain and suffering. Tightening his hold upon the naginata and long-sought blade of legend, Gilgamesh sprinted vertically up the wall, ignoring the pull of gravity upon his body.

And glowing arrows raining upon his position.

"He's quite tenacious!"

One final pivot... one last flexing of his legs... sent Gilgamesh soaring across the chamber stretching from the deepest basement to tallest tower of the castle. He tucked both legs against his chest, scarf and cloak fluttering in the errant wind. And with a dull *whump*,

landed upon the ground floor station, all six arms braced and both feet pointed forward. Humph! Practice truly did make perfect. Not only did he stick the landing phenomenally, but the entrance hall lay within sight. It was just ahead! Several dozen meters stood between him and his deserved freedom!

By the time the three stooges resumed pursuit, he'd be long gone with -

Another gunshot sent an arrow passing dangerously close to his temple.

"Now that's simply not fair!"

Gilgamesh scowled at the sudden change in fortune. He rolled forward, placing himself out of harm's reach. And without further prompting, fled the lift station as fast as his feet could move.

"... almost... there..."

As the interior lighting gave way to beautiful sunlight filtering through stained-glass windows, Gilgamesh counted down from five. He waited until the proper moment. Timing everything just right. And with the polished stone façade caught underneath his boot, effortlessly vaulted over the intricate fountain stretching around the balcony. Of course, he could have simply taken the stairs. But that was boring! Taking the easy route had no style! No sense of flamboyance or excitement! How could anyone remember him, the great Gilgamesh, if he behaved like a cautious coward?

Besides, ignoring the stairs was simply quicker.

"MWAHAHAHA!"

He leaned backwards midjump, avoiding the expensive chandelier dangling from the ceiling. With the unwrapped naginata resting against his shoulder and the newly appropriated blade of legend securely clasped in his fingers, Gilgamesh laughed. He chuckled.

Why, he even chortled a little! This was his moment of triumph! After days of planning, victory was almost in his grasp!

Nothing remained but making a clean escape, leaving this world and the three stooges behind!

“FOOLS! You faced the mightiest swordsman in the realm of light. You faced ME! Gilga-”

His foot slipped against the floor, sending Gilgamesh - armor, weapons and introduction - crashing into the wall.

“Well... well... well...”

With one arrowgun bouncing against his shoulder and the other dangling from his fingers, the sharpshooter watched Gilgamesh lose his footing courtesy of the patch of ice that appeared right before he landed. Sure, he wasn't the *best* at magic. Some people might say he sucked. But a little ice... some flames... maybe a spark of lightning? stuff like that was simple. And boy, did playing against common misconceptions work to his advantage.

“You know...”

The sniper stopped at the bottom of the stairs, “... for a - what's the word - infamous thief, you really aren't that good.”

“Humph!”

At the obnoxious and condescending remark, Gilgamesh brushed aside his growing migraine. The nerve of this man! Did this insignificant sharpshooter believe his repartee was worthy of compliment? Bah! He heard wittier retorts from chocobos! Propping one pair of hands against the ground, Gilgamesh launched himself into a front flip. He vaulted onto his feet with another grunt, dust settling from his armor, “I cannot understand why you people are just so darn angry!”

Working the kink out of his back, the multi-armed swordsman glared at the sniper, "A blade of such magnificence..."

His train of thought momentarily disembarked when the remaining stooges appeared on the balcony. Which was anything but good news. He could sense the venomous hatred wafting from the lancer. And the axe-wielder seemed quite a bit less stoic. But with a shake of his head, Gilgamesh pushed the menacing, razor-sharp axe to the back of his mind. And, tightening his grasp on the legendary sword, pointed several fingers at the obnoxious sharpshooter before pouting.

"... well, it's just wrong to seal it away in a vault! It's not a common collectable! Or even a mail-ordered item! You should be grateful that I, Gilgamesh, master swordsman, shall wield this beautiful sword against powerful monsters and adversaries!"

"You? A master swordsman? As if!"

The sharpshooter waited for his comrades to speak. Or really, to say anything. It certainly would have taken the pressure off. But when they left him hanging, choosing to remain mute like two sticks in the mud, he rolled his eyes, "*Anyway*, it being a royal treasure and all, I'm afraid Tournesol's not going anywhere."

Click!

"Normally I'd ask you to surrender. Protocol and all that nonsense..."

Click!

Assured the multi-armed swordsman was paying attention, the sharpshooter raised the twin arrowguns, fingers curled against the sensitive triggers of the arrowguns, "But thinking you can steal Tournesol from under our nose? Heh... you ain't walking out of this place alive, pal."

Gilgamesh's opinion of the arrogant braggart fell several positions.

On the outside, he was the epitome of stoicism. A well-trained façade. He watched the other two stooges without raising an eyebrow, naginata poised to intercept any attacks. But deep in his heart, away from wandering eyes, Gilgamesh was panicking. No! No! No! Darn it! This wasn't how things were supposed to happen! Getting caught... chased through the castle by these annoying rascals... forced to listen to cheap and pathetic death threats... hadn't been part of his plan!

The royal treasury should have been unguarded!

So, how did the obnoxious sniper discover his well-crafted plans?

For a moment, Gilgamesh pondered whether he missed something vitally important.

Bah! It didn't matter!

"That's what you think!"

A swirling vortex of shadows materialized beneath his boots. Shifting bands of black, blue and purple materialized from nothingness. It bubbled and hissed, emitted an ominous feeling that caused the sharpshooter to instinctively retreat across the entrance hall. A reaction which brought Gilgamesh an immense amount of amusement. To the casual observer, this ability resembled those Corridors of Darkness. But this was different! His own special technique! Something refined until he, the great Gilgamesh, could utilize its amazing properties without consequence!

"What the -"

Mocking the sniper's surprised outburst with well-earned laughter, Gilgamesh quickly leapt into the maelstrom of darkness, "... until we meet again!"

Not for the first, second or even tenth time since the bastard appeared in the royal treasury, Braig found himself pissed to high hell. It was amazing. Every single thing the multi-armed criminal did - or better yet, pulled out of his ass - got underneath his skin.

“Screw that!”

He unleashed a full salvo of ammunition at Gilgamesh. The arrowguns heated in his hands as he aimed at the bastard's vital areas. Hoping that, even if the guy got away, a single good shot ensured a painful death. But it was too late. By the time he opened fire, Gilgamesh had already vanished into the darkness. Scoffing out the side of his mouth, Braig fired one final arrow into the dissipating shadows, expressing his frustration the only way he knew how.

“Ridiculous...”

As Dilan and Aeus approached the last spot Gilgamesh had been standing, Braig angrily holstered his arrowguns, “I could have used some help, you know.”

When neither of them said anything - or, for a lack of a better word, responded - he grumbled out the side of his mouth. Jeez, talk about tension. He could feel their annoyance. It filled the entrance hall, made everything feel depressed and gloomy. And who could blame them? Not him. And definitely not Ansem, no matter what people thought. Breaking into the royal treasury was impossible. Or, upon second thought, it *should* have been impossible. Not even *he* could waltz into the treasury without getting shredded apart by magic.

However, as much as it bugged him, Gilgamesh escaping with Tournesol was only the least of his worries.

“Hmm...”

Aeus dragged his fingers across the smooth marble tiles, “He's gone.”

“Really? What gave it away?”

All but ignoring the comment, Aeus continued kneeling for several seconds. The tips of his gloves turned a faint brown from the thin film of dirt covering the floor. Blue eyes narrowed introspectively, thoughts overlapped in the back of his mind. And after almost a minute of tense silence, grumbled in the back of his throat, “We must report this incident to His Lordship at once.”

“I’ll... uh... catch up in a minute.”

Waving nonchalantly over his shoulder, Braig pretended to examine the floor for any clues Aeus might have overlooked. After all, he was one of the best snipers throughout the realm of light. If anyone could find a missing piece of evidence, it would be him. But once his comrades disappeared up the stairs, likely heading straight to Ansem’s office, he groaned loudly under his breath.

This was freaking *perfect*.

Out of everything that could *possibly* go wrong, it had to be somebody breaking into the treasury. Now that Gilgamesh proved it was possible, Ansem was going to beef up security. It had taken *months* to memorize everything that was necessary. If anything changed, even in the slightest, not only would his hard work go to waste, but the chances of Xehanort’s plans unfolding without a hitch dropped considerably.

And he did *not* want the blame when the old coot wondered who screwed everything up.

Last edited: Jan 29, 2019

Chapter 4.2

“Today you will be examined for the Mark of Mastery.”

Somber reflection clung to his heart at the weight of those ten words. With a tight scowl easily mistaken for indifference, Eraqus gazed upon his eldest pupils. Aqua. Terra. His thoughts grew emotional. Sorrow and pride whispered at the back of his mind. It still felt like yesterday when he accepted them as his apprentices. A young, energetic Terra willing to defend his friends. And an introverted Aqua who made friends with Terra despite her initial shyness. Now, more than seven years since that fateful morning, his pupils stood upon the precipice of change.

And he, their master, deemed them prepared for the arduous journey ahead.

The perilous adventure of self-discovery every bearer of the Keyblade has undergone since the time of the ancient war.

“But realize this is neither a competition nor a battle. It is a test not of wills... nor of emotions or pride. But of your Heart. Both of you may prevail. Or neither.”

Eraqus paused once more. Introspection masked as stoic acceptance concealed the turbulent storm that was his heart. The Mark of Mastery. As their parent in all but blood, if he could have his way, Aqua and Terra would achieve the Mark in a heartbeat. But as their master, he could not allow emotional attachments cloud his judgment. Perhaps they *were* ready. Their hearts were strong. They understood how delicate the balance was between light and darkness. Yet Eraqus could not - no, refused to - dismiss the concern in his heart. A powerful and ancient darkness threatened the realm of light.

A darkness connected to Ardyn Lucis Caelum.

“However, the decision to accept this honor remains yours.”

The jagged scar tracing over his right eye itched. It burned with an old pain. But Eraqus refused to acknowledge its presence. As his eldest pupils remained at attention, he swept an arm outward, “If you believe yourselves unworthy of the Mark... if you believe yourselves unprepared for the challenges which lay ahead... speak now.”

Neither Aqua nor Terra uttered a single word.

Instead, to his pride as their master, their determination hardened.

A decision he accepted without reluctance nor complaint.

“Very well!”

Eraqus allowed those words to echo across the great hall. Until the proclamation whispered beyond what his lungs could produce. At his side, standing just beyond the sunlight filtering through the stained-glass windows, Ventus cheered Terra and Aqua. His youngest pupil was brimming with confidence and excitement. Ventus was proud to watch his friends become masters. Yet he, as their master, could not find such happiness. If things were different, this day would be cause for celebration. Two of the youngest potential masters in decades ready to undergo the Mark. The other masters... Beatrix, Lulu, Xehanort and even Yen Sid... should have stood at his sides. Observing *his* pupils ascend to the rank of master.

But with darkness spreading across the realm of light, one world already destroyed and countless others threatened, the peace their order had maintained for centuries was endangered.

“I originally planned a more traditional exam.”

Holding out his hand, Master’s Defender materialized in a shroud of golden light, “However, troubling times lay before us. Ardyn Lucis Caelum... a name I’d hoped never to hear... has escaped his eternal prison. His presence enough to cast a shadow over the realm of

light. Additionally, someone bearing the Keyblade has fallen to darkness. A masked individual whose mad ambitions already destroyed an entire world.”

Something passed through his eldest pupil's eyes.

He felt the horror and disbelief radiating from Aqua's heart.

“That's impossible!”

Ventus knew the traditions behind the Mark of Mastery. He'd spent the last few weeks reading everything about it. This was Aqua and Terra's exam. He had no right to speak. Or even shout. To interrupt their exam, even over something important, could jeopardize their chances. And yet, he couldn't help himself, “How can that be true?”

“My old friend Yen Sid contacted me several days ago.”

The stalwart guardian of the world ignored his youngest pupil's outburst. Instead of chastising Ventus, he softened his tone. Instead of punishing his eldest students, something that was within his rights as their master, he allowed the tension to dissipate, “Per his investigations into this Keyblade bearer's origin and with Master Beatrix's assistance, monsters born from negativity... spawned from darkness itself... have grown more numerous in Burmecia, Realm of Eternal Rain.”

“Aqua. Terra.”

A hushed silence enveloped the great hall as his pupils snapped to attention, “You will travel to Burmecia and investigate these creatures. Fledgling emotions taken form. Yen Sid calls them ‘Unversed.’ You are tasked with determining their source. And eliminating anything threatening the balance between the light and darkness.”

For but a moment, Eraqus believed Aqua would speak her mind. A question laid upon the tip of her tongue. But in the end, to his subtle

surprise, it was Terra who stepped forward.

“Master, this might sound obvious... but the Unversed couldn’t have appeared out of nowhere.”

Terra pushed aside the hesitation swallowing his heart. He refused to acknowledge the weakness. Not when there was something Eraqus wasn’t telling them. A clue. Or hint. Something that completed the picture, “You’ve mentioned Burmecia’s connected to Lindblum. Is it possible Ardyn Lucis Caelum is the one behind the Unversed?”

“... it’s unlikely.”

Dismissing Master’s Defender, Eraqus frowned, masking his worry with stoic acceptance, “We have sworn testimony the Unversed... or monsters similar to them... are under the control of the masked Keyblade bearer. During your investigation, you will determine what connection exists between those monsters and the Unversed. Whether we are facing potentially two problems. The chances of Ardyn Lucis Caelum’s involvement are slim. Nevertheless, both of you must remain on guard at all times.”

His glowered softened as he turned to Aqua, “Your hearts are strong.”

Pride shimmered in the depths of his heart when Terra snapped to attention, “Capable of overcoming any obstacle.”

Yet with somber reluctance, Eraqus stared at his eldest pupils not as their parent, but master, “The Mark of Mastery is not a time for competition. When equal powers clash, their natures are revealed. But when equal powers work together... hearts trusting in each other... the impossible can be accomplished. Work together. Stay vigilant. And above all, trust in your hearts to know what’s right.”

A sense of relief swept through the great hall.

And thus, Eraqus allowed himself a moment's introspection for somber reflection. His heart was full of pride, both as their parent and master. Despite their weaknesses, an intrinsic part of their very being, Aqua and Terra stood upon the cusp of the Mark. They understood the ramification of becoming masters. Knew how to maintain the delicate balance between light and darkness.

Softening both posture and tone, the stalwart guardian unfolded his arms and addressed the final matter, "There's one last thing I must tell you. Master Beatrix has requested her student accompany you during the Mark of Mastery. An incredibly unorthodox request. One I did not take lightly. However, after much discussion - and speaking with Yen Sid - I have agreed Ryuko's presence *won't* jeopardize the sanctity of the exam."

"Master Beatrix has a student?"

Aqua shared her confusion with Terra, "I... we... didn't know that."

"Beatrix only accepted Ryuko as her pupil several weeks ago."

He had initial reservations. Concerns about her decision. But now he understood why Beatrix chose Ryuko. The details were second-hand. Gained through conversation with Yen Sid and his apprentice. The girl... Ryuko... played an important role defending Lindblum from Ardyn Lucis Caelum's vengeance. Through her selfless actions, countless lives and the world itself was saved from darkness. But that was merely the beginning. For equally important to her feats, Ryuko hailed from the only world since the ancient war to be forcibly dragged into darkness.

A tragedy created by a Keyblade bearer.

One of their own who embraced the corrupting influence of darkness.

Eraqus wanted to blame himself for the horrible tragedy Ryuko had endured. To shoulder the burden of guilt. For a bearer of the

Keyblade to accept darkness into their heart cast shame upon their order.

“But you should not underestimate Ryuko.”

Forcing his concern into a stern glower, Eraqus stared at Aqua. Then Terra. His gaze swept between his eldest students as he observed the chaotic emotions in their hearts, “Along with Yen Sid’s apprentice and a thief by the name of Gilgamesh, she fought Ardyn Lucis Caelum. It was a terrible battle. One they had no chance of winning. Yet their efforts prevented him from dragging Lindblum into darkness long enough for Yen Sid’s arrival. A miraculous victory that nearly cost their lives.”

Terra was speechless.

He tried saying something. But all he could accomplish... all his body would do... was remain silent. With his fingers clenched, he stared at the ground. He’d trained with Aqua and Ven more times than he could count. Pushed himself until he collapsed, Aqua groaning while Ven chuckled as he tried not throwing up his lunch. But what Ryuko did was different. Because not once... not a single time... had his life, even training with Master Eraqus, ever been on the line.

It put everything into a new light.

“Don’t worry, Master.”

The subtle trembling of his fingers stopped, “Even if Aqua and I are enough to handle the Unversed, the more help the better. No point taking unnecessary chances.”

“That’s right.”

Aqua chimed in, nodding alongside a faint smile. Her own thoughts equally turbulent to Terra’s. But at the same time, the lesson grasped different, “The only thing that’s important is stopping the Unversed.”

With pride coursing through his heart, Eraqus raised his hand and, in a flash of golden light, once more summoned Master's Defender. And, after clearing his mind of distraction, tapped the Keyblade against the ground, releasing a pulse of soothing wind and white magic.

"I have unlocked the Lanes Between. You may use these forbidden pathways to travel between this world and Burmecia. But remain vigilant. Your armor might protect your hearts but the darkness within those spaces looms closer than usual. According to Beatrix, you will meet Ryuko at the Dragoon's Gate."

Relaxing his fingers, Eraqus stepped forward as the Keyblade vanished, "Now go! Fulfill your duties! Prove yourselves worthy of the Mark!"

Aqua and Terra snapped to attention, arms pressed against their sides, and bowed, "Yes, Master!"

Last edited: May 8, 2018

Chapter 4.3

It was raining.

She *hated* the rain with every fiber of her being.

With the corners of her mouth twitching, Ryuko slouched forward in the chair. From her spot inside the weirdly-designed building unlike anything in Alexandria or Lindblum... or hell, even back home... she watched the day-to-day life of Burmecia. Staring through the rain-streaked windows, Ryuko tracked every person walking through the streets. Her eyes unfocused as she counted, lost track, and then started from scratch, each raindrop on the window. A desperate attempt at distracting herself from the deep-seated irritation growing inside her heart.

“Ugh...”

And just like that, Ryuko remembered *why* she was sitting inside the café, perched on the edge of the chair, nose almost pressed against the window.

As a family of three walked in front of the café, all of them unbothered by the pouring rain, she groaned into her arms. With the cool glass almost touching her forearms, Ryuko closed her eyes and *tried* focusing on something else. But it didn't work. Instead, her mood worsened. When Beatrix ordered her to wait for Terra and Aqua before doing anything, she hadn't thought it would take three hours and counting! And if that wasn't bad enough, she had no freaking clue what they looked like!

For all she knew, Aqua and Terra walked by the café hours ago!

Her sneakers rocked angrily against the floor.

No matter how much time passed, she *remembered* what happened underneath Ragyo Kiryuin's house. It caused her blood to run cold.

Her heart to wince. Sure, the Unversed weren't anything close to the army of monsters she and Satsuki fought. But they were probably nothing more than a distraction. Something to trick people into thinking everything was fine. If that masked bastard was still the same arrogant same piece of shit, he was probably looking for Burmecia's Keyhole. And that *pissed* her off! Beatrix might have claimed the Keyholes were normally hidden. That not even people wielding the Keyblade could find them without a lot of help. Or other weird crap.

But if that freak got lucky, even for a split second, thousands of people would suffer.

Leaning forward until her chin was resting on the back of the chair, Ryuko glared at a random puddle in the street. Maybe she was overthinking things. After all, what were the odds the bastard would show himself here, on Burmecia, instead of the countless other worlds? Her luck wasn't *nearly* that good. With every master and their friends hunting his ass, he would need to be a condescending prick to show his face. Nobody was that stupid. But, if she somehow managed to hit the jackpot against all odds, this might be the only time she'd get a shot at revenge.

Because there was nothing else she could do.

Everyone she cared about was still lost in the realm of light. Mako. Satsuki. Hell, she'd *cry* if Jakuzure starting shouting insults in her ear. Despite doing his best, and she couldn't blame him for trying, Yen Sid hadn't found anyone. Not a single trace. They were lost. Or worse. For all her strength, even with the Keyblade at her disposal, she was helpless. Stuck watching others search for her friends and family.

Which made kicking the masked freak's ass until he stopped breathing the only thing that could make her feel better.

"... damn it."

She bit the inside of her cheek, allowing the pain to clear her mind. Why the hell was she getting pissed? This wasn't her mission. This was Aqua and Terra's Mark of Mastery. The test to prove if their hearts were worthy of being Keyblade masters. It was a big freaking deal! Hell, she wasn't even supposed to be here! Beatrix had to pull a lot of strings to convince that Eraqus guy, Aqua and Terra's master Ryuko reminded herself with an annoyed scoff, she could help.

Clearing her mind with a deep, calming breath, Ryuko listened to her heart. The voice of reason that, for some bizarre reason, sounded just like Satsuki. And that voice was shouting at her to suck it up. Because if being bored for another hour meant she could finally kick the masked bastard's ass, finally getting revenge for what he did to her home, then what was the problem?

A beat passed.

Ryuko leapt onto her feet, overturning the chair with a loud *thump* and annoying the Burmecian behind the counter.

"No more sitting around!"

This... none of this... was right! Doing nothing because of *orders* went against the very principle of wielding the Keyblade! It made her heart tremble. Caused her jaw to clench until her teeth hurt. Forced to do nothing while the darkness, that weird feeling of something seriously messed up, moved beneath her feet went against everything Beatrix taught her. And more important, betrayed everything she stood for.

Maybe it went against tradition. Or maybe it didn't.

Quite frankly, she didn't give a damn about something that stupid.

Because anybody wielding the Keyblade, masters or students or whatever, needed to protect people from darkness.

And kick the asses of anyone standing in their way.

That was *her* tradition!

With a snort, she jabbed both hands into her jacket. Interfering with the Mark of Mastery was a terrible idea. But every minute wasted following orders was more time the masked freak had to finish whatever he was planning. A snarl pushed through her clenched teeth as she marched towards the café's door. Her heart quivered angrily at the depressing memories.

If she'd been a little smarter... if Mako had pieced everything together before that stormy afternoon... if *she'd* figured out the psychopath's plans... they could have stopped the guy from destroying their home.

As the bastard's smug laughter filled her heart, Ryuko clenched her fingers, knuckles bleeding white, and stepped into the pouring rain.

She didn't give a rat's ass if Beatrix lost her temper. Or that Eraqus guy shouted his lungs out about 'interfering with sacred traditions.' Protecting the realm of light from psychopathic bastards... making sure innocent people didn't have to worry about monsters destroying their worlds for shits and giggles... was her damn job! It's why she had the Keyblade! Even after a month hoping to hear Mako's laughter, Satsuki criticizing her grades or Mako's mom's delicious cooking, she was still Ryuko Matoi! A weird and messed up girl in a screwy universe who would do *anything* to protect her friends and family.

But even if it meant losing the Keyblade and her one shot at reuniting with everyone, she was gonna make sure nobody suffered the same pain she felt every fucking day.

"Going somewhere?"

"Huh?"

A gasp hissed between Ryuko's teeth at the strange voice. Without waiting for an invitation, she spun around, water splashing against

her sneakers. As rain pelted her shoulders, dripping from her jacket and hair, the corner of her mouth curled into a sneer. Her brow furrowed into an annoyed glower. And then she stared at the Burmecian perched on the roof right above the café. Moisture born from the very heart of Burmecia dripped from the dragon knight's intricately-woven red coat, the coat-of-arms stitched upon the escutcheon gleaming from the storm. With a three-pronged javelin clasped in her left hand, a winged hat concealing most of her features, shoulder-length white hair hiding the rest, the Burmecian dragon knight bent her knees, the orange ribbon tied to her tail flickering between bursts of lightning.

And then vanished in a flash of speed.

"Master Beatrix informed His Majesty of your impetuosity."

While the Burmecians gathered in the street gasped at the dragoon's sudden arrival, the children cheering or begging their parents to get closer, Ryuko's heart skipped a beat. Her hand involuntarily twitched. The Keyblade almost appeared in her fingers. Damn it! The woman was fast! She hadn't seen her move! And was that magic? Or did the dragoon actually jump off the building? Without bothering to answer the question, she leapt backwards, putting some distance between herself and the Burmecian.

Only to immediately step into a puddle.

"I thought it was ridiculous. The Hero of Lindblum... Master Beatrix's pupil... refusing to follow orders."

Propping the javelin against her shoulder, water dripping from the razor-sharp bladed edge, the dragon knight shook her head, "Surely waiting for your friends isn't *that* aggravating."

"Let's get one thing straight! I've never even *met* Terra or Aqua!"

Anger flushed through Ryuko's heart, "Second! How do you know Beatrix?"

“Humph... you don't even properly address your own master.”

At those bitter words, which elicited a modicum of realization from the teenager, the dragon knight spun the three-pronged javelin between her fingers. And then promptly *slammed* the intricate weapon between her clawed feet. Upon which, as if some unseen signal spread through the streets, the crowd dispersed. Something that took more than a minute. But once they were alone, able to speak without fear of eavesdrop, returned Ryuko's glare, “Master Beatrix is an old friend of the King. And a valuable ally of Sir Fratley. Which is why I have been ordered to grant you access to Gizamaluke's Grotto.”

“Of course, your Keyblade can unlock the entrance without my assistance.”

A murmur of amusement clung to the dragon's knight's voice, “But I'm certain Master Beatrix taught you better than that.”

Snorting at the dragoon's obvious - and freaking bad - attempt at getting under her skin, Ryuko folded her arms. And then scoffed at the mischief dancing across the single visible jade eye, “I'm guessing you ain't gonna take me there, right?”

“Not until your friends... Aqua and Terra, were they... arrive.”

Maybe three Keyblades were necessary to repel the darkness. Perhaps such overwhelming strength was required to render extinct the monsters plaguing her world. As she stood before the teenager, she questioned such wisdom. It seemed *odd*, at the very least. But even with doubt clouding her heart, she shifted into a more comfortable posture, javelin caught between her shoulder and neck, “Incidentally, you were sitting in that café for almost three hours. I would have thought Master Beatrix told you when to meet them.”

An eyebrow twitched, “Listen you -”

“Freya Crescent.”

The unexpected introduction took the wind out of Ryuko's sails. It left her standing in the rain, mouth hanging open like an idiot, "Huh?"

"If you're going to shout," Freya shook her head, "At least use my name."

"Tch!"

Ryuko wanted to return fire. But in the tense silence following Freya's awkward introduction, she considered her options. Weighed the pros and cons. Did all the stupid nonsense Beatrix and Steiner drilled into her skull. It was difficult. Especially when she had the perfect insult waiting on the tip of her tongue. But with a deep breath disguised as a sneer, she managed to clear her mind. And then promptly scoffed at Freya, "Fine! I'll wait for Terra and Aqua! But I don't get why you're going along with this!"

It might have drawn some unwanted attention, but she couldn't find it in her heart to give a damn, "It doesn't matter if it's important! Or tradition! You shouldn't stop protecting people because of old-fashioned bullshit like that!"

Hidden by her bone-white hair, the contours of Freya's face shifted.

"The Unversed are contained. At least for the time being," somberness clung to the dragoon's voice. It left her feeling ambivalent. Her heart in chaos, "My fellow dragon knights have destroyed the monsters whenever they materialize from the darkness. Something that... until recently... had been sufficient for protecting His Majesty's world."

A whispering silence brushed against Freya's heart, "Every day they get stronger. More numerous. Smarter. At this rate, even Sir Fratley's strength soon won't be enough."

Ryuko *tried*, but despite her best efforts, she couldn't bring herself to speak. It was impossible. And that, more than anything, was frustrating. Maybe it was because she was even more messed up

than normal. But as the rain trickled inside her jacket and down her back, something about Freya's words plucked at her heart. Because she understood the suffering and pain everyone on Burmecia probably felt. Back on her world, the Unversed hadn't shown themselves the very end. When it was too late to stop the bastard. But this was different. Burmecia was different.

She could *stop* the masked freak before anything bad happened.

"Oh?"

Freya glanced aside when two sets of approaching footsteps caused her ears to twitch. Their owners weren't Burmecians. One stepped too heavily, their stride prideful and strong. And the other's footsteps softer. As if their owner feared disturbing some unperceived delicate balance, "It seems we have company."

"Huh?"

It took a moment before Ryuko's mind caught up. Because she was *still* focused on the masked bastard. And the Unversed he definitely controlled. But when her consciousness finally kicked itself into first-gear, she blinked rapidly at the change of topic. Then, her heart having decided to loudly shout 'screw it' to more questions, leaned around Freya and stared at the two relatively normal people walking towards them.

"Hey, Ryuko!"

Almost immediately upon raising his hand, Terra froze at the awkward tension. It clung to the air, made the hairs on the back of his neck stiffen. Glancing at Aqua, then at the teenager and dragon knight, he looked around, rain dripping from his hair, "Uh... you *are* Ryuko, right?"

"What Terra's *trying* to say is..."

Embarrassment swelled inside Aqua's heart. She couldn't believe he actually said that. So much for wanting to start off on the right foot, "... is that it's nice to meet you, Ryuko. Master Eraqus spoke highly of you."

The banter between Aqua and Terra promptly pulled Ryuko back to reality, "Huh? He did?"

"He described how you fought Ardyn Lucis Caelum," Aqua saw something flash across Ryuko's eyes at that name. And immediately chastised herself. It was obvious the battle remained a sore topic for Ryuko. Nevertheless, she forced out a friendly smile, "That if it wasn't for you and Mickey, Lindblum would have been destroyed."

"Humph, it appears you're rather famous," Freya arched an eyebrow at Ryuko's silence, "Surprised?"

"Tch! Not really!"

Ryuko wasn't particularly angry at Freya's second attempt at getting under her skin. It was starting to get really old. Not to mention pathetic. She'd heard worse calling Satsuki during the middle of school. Snapping her attention back to Aqua and Terra hard enough that bangs of wet hair *slapped* against her face, she folded her arms, steadied her heart and took a deep breath, "And I wouldn't go that far! Until Yen Sid showed up, Ardyn was kicking our asses! Even Mickey couldn't do anything against the guy."

"... humble, aren't you?"

The master-in-training scratched his neck. Normally, he'd apologize. Profusely. But for some weird reason, and maybe it was just him, he felt like Ryuko wouldn't appreciate anything but the truth, "Anyway, I suppose introductions are in order. I'm Terra. And she's Aqua."

With one hand propped on his waist, Terra jabbed a thumb towards Aqua, "Sorry about the wait. The Keyblade can do a lot of amazing things. Unfortunately, directions are simply too much.

Ryuko blinked at Terra's informal tone. And found herself puzzled at the way Aqua's smile widened into something infectious. This wasn't anything like she expected. After weeks of Beatrix talking about Eraqus, how the Keyblade master was *really* passionate about maintaining the balance between light and darkness, she had expected them to act snuck-up, arrogant and really snobbish. But before long, confusion snapped back to annoyance. Not at Aqua or Terra. But at herself for thinking like a jackass. So, standing in the rain, soaked to the bone and nose runny, she bit the inside of her cheek.

"So... uh... the Mark of Mastery, huh?"

Thrusting both hands into her jacket, she snorted under her breath, "I guess you two really are badasses."

"Badasses? Nah..."

Terra chuckled at the compliment, "*You* fought Ardyn Lucis Caelum! I don't know how many people you and Mickey saved... maybe that's something we'll never know... but compared to you, Aqua and me have a lot of catching up to do. So, should we start calling you Master Ryuko? Or should we wait until you pass your own Mark with flying colors?"

"Keep laughin' it up!"

While Ryuko begrudgingly returned Terra's backhanded admiration, Aqua covered her mouth. She shook her head, embarrassment swelling through her heart. Yet she smiled underneath her hand. It peeked between her fingers alongside laughter. She couldn't deny Terra's goofiness broke the tension. Maybe things would actually be alright now that Ryuko seemed a lot more comfortable, "Alright... I think introductions are over. We're here to investigate the Unversed. Not get into arguments over who's stronger."

"Yeah, you're right."

The reason *why* they were on Burmecia returned Terra to earth. Scratching his neck, he released a heavy sigh, amusement gone, “We should start by asking if anyone’s seen somebody with a Keyblade. Ryuko, I’m guessing Master Beatrix told you the details?”

A flash of anger tore through Ryuko’s heart.

“You could say that...”

The unexpected darkness clinging to her voice surprised Terra. It took the prospective master off balance. Something he shared with Aqua. For a moment, he wondered if he somehow insulted Ryuko. His mouth opened, an apology floating on the tip of his tongue, as cold rain battered his shoulders, “I... uh... sorry.”

“Don’t sweat it!”

Despite glowering hard enough to curdle milk, Ryuko wasn’t blaming Terra, Aqua or even Freya. *They* weren’t the reason she was angry. That honor was reserved for the masked freak she *hoped* was stupid enough to lay low on Burmecia. Brushing off his sincere apology with a mocking snort, she folded her arms, leaned backwards and scoffed as water dripped down her face, “I just remembered something important. Trust me, if I was mad at you, you’d know.”

“Please forgive Terra.”

With slightly more force than necessary, Aqua pushed her friend’s shoulder. She didn’t need to sense Ryuko’s heart to understand this was a painful subject. Maybe it could have helped patch things, but it was obvious Ryuko encountered the masked boy sometime during her apprenticeship. A battle that must not have ended well, explaining the traumatic memories all but clinging to her heart, “For some strange reason, his mouth moves by itself, which gets him into a lot of trouble.”

The betrayal in Terra’s eyes could be seen for miles, “That’s not true... most of the time.”

As her friend denied the obvious, Aqua refocused on the matter at hand. The reason they were standing in the pouring rain. There was... something. An uncomfortable feeling spreading through the depths of her heart. Slightly parted lips snapped shut while streams of water dripped down her face, "Master Eraqus was right. There's darkness here. It's faint... but at the same time, strong. If the Unversed are being controlled by the masked boy, he's far away."

"Or maybe he's hiding underground."

Apprehension welled within the depths of Terra's heart as he glanced around the street. The Unversed might be lurking in the shadows, but nobody appeared nervous or scared, "Master Eraqus mentioned a grotto. If this guy's hiding somewhere in Burmecia, I'd bet Gil he's there."

"I already know that."

To his credit and Master Eraqus's relief, he kept his composure. And, after a moment's pause, asked the only logical question, "You do?"

"Freya told me everything."

Ryuko expressed her shimmering frustration in the healthiest way possible. With a withering glare, an all-purpose snarl and a shit tone of well-deserved vitriol, "But she wouldn't bring me there until you guys showed up!"

"Heh..."

The mirthless laughter settled heavily upon the stormy streets. To others, it might have sounded pleasant. But to Freya, it carried the weight of her guilt and self-loathing. The concern turning her heart into a raging maelstrom. Shifting her javelin into a more comfortable position, she turned around, rain dripping from her coat. A moment passed. And then another in quick succession. Before, after a long pause, she glanced over her shoulder, a single jade eye visible between white bangs, "You truly don't care about anything, do you?"

A snort passed through Ryuko's teeth, "Right *now* I only care about stopping this bastard!"

"Fair enough."

Shrugging at the answer, Freya spared another glance at Terra and Aqua, "The grotto is named after the founding king of Burmecia, Gizamaluke. It's a sacred sanctuary that Sir Fratley cannot enter without His Majesty's permission. If this masked boy is behind the Unversed, that is where he'll be hiding."

"But we should hurry."

Nothing more was required. No other words grasped her conflicted heart with worrying whispers. As water dripped from her coat, Freya took off into a sprint. A pace Aqua, Terra and Ryuko easily matched. Rippling puddles splashed their cold contents around her clawed feet. The cobblestone streets transformed into a blur of greys and blacks, her fellow Burmecians moving out of their way as thunder roared overhead. Giving Freya to impetuous to stare into the pouring skies, "The heavens grow ominous. Something terrible is about to happen."

Chapter 4.4

As mentioned earlier, I split this section into two parts. While the actual, full-length section continues beyond this point, the significance forced me to end the section at a very specific point. Something, I'm more than certain, you'll enjoy! By the way, I had a lot of trouble finding the onomatopoeia for 'hand bell ringing,' so I decided to just go with 'Ring. Ring.'

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/c/c2/Sc00006.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140315010348>]

Ring.

Ring.

Ryuko could admit it was a nice sound. If the situation weren't so messed up, she'd probably compliment whoever made the bell. Or, at the very least, clap her hands or something. The noise was soothing. Maybe a little ominous or gloomy.

Ring.

Ring.

Her fingers strummed against her arms as the bell in Freya's hand, a golden ornament that wouldn't look out of place in one of those fancy museums, resonated with the massive church bell built into the impressive pair of doors blocking their path.

Ring.

Ring.

She watched the design etched on the door, something close to a dragon or winged lizard, shimmer with a brilliant purple light. But

Ryuko couldn't find the energy to give a damn about the magical lightshow. They were in Burmecia for one reason. To kick the masked bastard's ass. Sure, everybody was calm. And yeah, Aqua and Terra were really nice. But she could feel the darkness coming from the grotto. The psychopath was hiding here. Which was unnerving. Because the last time this happened, an *army* of monsters had been waiting for them

So, where the hell were the Unversed?

Ring.

Ring.

Her train of thought derailed when the bell shattered.

"Huh? What happened? Did it break or something?"

Freya suppressed the tension rippling through her heart as Gizamaluke's Grotto, forbidden to everyone, including Sir Fratley, opened its gates. Jade eyes stared through bone-white hair at the darkened passageway staring back at them. Accusing *her*, despite His Majesty's permission, of defiling the inner sanctuary. Rain trickled down her face, dripping from her snout as she felt the storm, already heavier than in recent memory, intensify. As if the rulers of old... wise kings and queens alike... looked unfavorably upon the foreign strangers, Keyblades or not.

"It did not break."

The response was quick. Cold. Precise. She clasped her javelin harder. The three-pronged weapon momentarily trembling from the pressure. But her heart was settled. Her mind already prepared, "The true bell... a sacred treasure of Burmecia... never leaves His Majesty's presence. That was merely a projection of the Holy Bell."

Her tail *swished* alongside the whispering wind, "Now come. Gizamaluke's Grotto awaits beyond the threshold."

Ryuko expected a long, arduous journey. Another door. Maybe even a flight of spiraling stairs. Training under Beatrix had gotten her used to such bullshit nonsense. But in less than a minute, she felt a cool breeze blowing against her face. The wet scent of rain filled her nose as the surrounding darkness gave way to natural light. A dreary grey pallor growing brighter by the second until, with her sneakers constantly slipping against the slippery floor, they stormed into Gizamaluke's Grotto.

"Huh..."

She'd seen a lot of weird stuff. Gotten into trouble when Steiner discovered she scaled the crystal sword atop Alexandria Castle. Investigated the dungeons underneath the castle. Been forced to proofread Steiner's terribly poetry. But this place was different in a weird, somber and screwy sort of way. First of all, the thing she noticed the minute they bolted through the door, was its size. Off the top of her head, she guessed it had to be three - no, five - times larger than the ugly as fuck room beneath Ragyo Kiryuin's manor. The room where everything went to hell.

But *unlike* that stupid room, the grotto gave off a strange 'calmness.' Like simply yelling would get her into a mess of trouble. Shafts of pale light filtered through the assorted skylights in the ceiling. Rain dripped into murky puddles of mud and filthy water. And, if she craned her head back, she could see plants and vines silhouetted against the thunderclouds.

"Incredible..."

The statues depicting the departed Burmecian kings and queens stretched around the antechamber. An unbroken line of royalty going back hundreds of years, if not longer. Each statue reaching the ceiling. And Aqua found herself mesmerized. Were all worlds this beautiful. It seemed incredulous. She wanted to ask Freya questions. And yet, her excitement disappeared into the depths of her heart. Beautiful or not, the grotto wasn't safe. She could *feel*

darkness lurking in the shadows. A dangerous presence waiting to pounce, “So... this is Gizamaluke’s Grotto?”

“I don’t see anyone.”

Ryuko glared at the largest, most important statue in the room, a Burmecian king decked out in fancy armor. It didn’t matter if Aqua or Terra were confused. The darkness was here. It was something she’d never forget. That monstrous feeling of *wrongness* was forever etched onto her heart in ways she didn’t understand. Yet they were completely alone. Nothing was in the room - err, grotto. For a moment, she stared at the blueish statue. Tried to imagine how long it would take to make something that size. And then grumbled out the corner of her mouth, “Jeez, how big is this place?”

“The previous rulers are interred beyond the antechamber.”

Freya motioned towards the numerous passages between each statue. An eye peeked between bone-white hair at the unnatural stillness. The tension clung to the air. The darkness filled her lungs. And yet, what cleared her mind was a single, disturbing observation, “Where are the Unversed?”

The question troubled Terra.

Out of everyone, he was fine with an easy mission, Mark of Mastery or not, as long as Burmecia was safe. Protecting innocent people from darkness was their duty. To keep the balance between light and darkness. Master Eraqus carved that lesson into his heart. He would do *anything* to prevent Burmecia from suffering destruction. But Freya was right. Darkness was everything. It writhed in the shadows. Threatened to seep into his heart at the first sign of weakness. But they were the only ones in the grotto. In fact, now that he thought about it, they hadn’t seen a single Unversed since arriving.

“Maybe you’re right about that.”

His brow furrowed into a frown as he looked around the empty grotto, “You think this masked guy already left? If he’s controlling them, it might explain the lack of Unversed.”

“Ryuko, is there anything you can tell us about this person?”

Aqua listened to the rain as she briefly wondered if Master Eraqus exaggerated the problem posed by the Unversed, “He’s a threat to the realm of light. If he shows up... if this is nothing more than a trap... we should be prepared, right?”

“If the freak has a weakness, we never found it.”

Ryuko hissed while marching around an exceptionally large puddle of mud. She wasn’t angry at Aqua or Terra. Or even Freya. They did nothing wrong. Yet her hands trembled as her jaw clenched. The masked bastard got away! He escaped before she could beat the living shit out of him! And that *thought*... that sense of overwhelming failure... stained her heart. No matter how much time passed, revenge was the only thing driving her forward. The psychopath destroyed her world. Took away everything she loved. So, until Yen Sid found Satsuki, Mako or anyone else, nothing else mattered besides killing the sadistic piece of crap!

“But don’t think about holding back!”

She grumbled incoherently before adding, “Satsuki stabbed the bastard through the heart. But he got up like it was freaking nothing! He has regeneration or something stupid. And he’s a lot stronger than he looks.”

Aqua blinked, not at Ryuko’s anger, but the *pain* in her voice, “Satsuki?”

“... my sister.”

Those two words slipped between her teeth before she could stop them. She didn’t like talking about home. Not even to Beatrix. Or

Garnet. They had tried. Time and time again. Always without pressure. Even if they were friendly and honest... even if they truly wanted nothing more than to help... the pain of losing everyone she loved was too much. Snorting under her breath before groaning, she forcibly changed the subject before Aqua could ask any more questions, "Anyway, why are we talking about Satsuki? We're here to stop the masked bastard and his Unversed! Not talk about me!"

"Hey -"

Terra stopped himself before the question left his mouth. He didn't know Ryuko had a sister. But then again, she wasn't really the talkative type. Nothing like Aqua or Ven. But there was something beneath the surface. The way she talked about the masked guy. Her anger whenever he's brought up. He must have done something terrible to Ryuko. And even thinking about such horrible things plucked at his heart. Because only one answer came to mind. There was only one possible reason for Ryuko's hatred.

"... never mind."

Shaking his head when Ryuko arched an eyebrow, although the look on her face suggested she *knew* what he wanted to ask, Terra turned around and promptly planted his foot straight into the mud.

"Son of a -"

Dirty water dripped from his boot. Thick mud clung to his hakama. It was absolutely disgusting. With another curse, he backpedaled. Desperately shaking his leg while Aqua found the nerve to laugh at his misfortune, Terra froze when he looked down, "What the..."

"Huh?"

Ryuko didn't like *anything* about Terra's sudden mood swing, "What? You find something?"

"Yeah, someone was here."

He didn't intend to sound worried or concerned. This was his Mark of Mastery. And a Keyblade master needed to stay calm, even in the most chaotic situations. But what he saw pulled at his heart. The wet filth staining his hakama became forgotten as he stared at the boot prints placed almost perfectly in the mud. Each created by someone at least as tall as him. Maybe taller, "And I don't think it's who we're looking for."

"What?"

Freya stood next to Terra before her disbelief echoed across the antechamber.

Crouching upon one knee, she analyzed their heel depth, width and overall shape. Her jade eyes stared at the boot prints trailing mockingly across the settled mud and water. And almost involuntarily, she pulled the intricate javelin closer to her chest. Nobody, not even Keyblade masters, had stepped foot within Gizamaluke's Grotto in decades. This somber day was the first His Majesty had granted *anyone* the Holy Bell. Her breath hastened at the revelation. Her pulse raced. And with more than an apprehensive grimace, Freya addressed the person most capable of assuaging her worries.

"Ryuko, does this masked individual you seek have a partner?"

"I don't know," Ryuko did *not* like what was happening, "The freak never mentioned anything about a -"

["Good afternoon, Ryuko!"](#)

Her blood ran cold at the familiar - *really* familiar - voice. She'd recognize that pompous arrogance anywhere! As memories of excruciating pain and darkness forced themselves back into the forefront of her heart, Ryuko felt her fingers trembling against her will. Sweat trickling down her face, mixing with the rain still clinging to her skin. And then she *pushed* those unwanted emotions away. Locked them into the deepest, darkest corner of her heart as she

pivoted sharply. Water falling from her hair. And stared straight into the bastard's monstrous eyes.

"Shit!"

While Aqua and Terra were only beginning to react, Ryuko reached into her jacket. She grasped the miniaturized Scissor Blade dangling from the necklace, a cheap piece of metal she'd bought in Alexandria. And then *tore* it free, sending links of blue metal bouncing against the floor, before snapping her wrist, transforming the hardened Life Fiber weapon back to full size. It wasn't the Keyblade. And it wasn't anything special.

But the psychopathic megalomaniac didn't deserve anything better than the Scissor Blade.

"Pleasant weather, isn't it?"

The man's voice echoed across the vast emptiness of the antechamber. He ignored the crimson blade pointed in his direction, choosing instead to smile, the friendly gesture silhouetted against the dreary light filtering through the cratered canopy. Now this... *this*... was a surprise unlike any other. To think this otherwise tedious day would conclude in such an interesting manner. One could only hope to always be so lucky.

With a *stomp*, he stopped walking the decaying sound of his footsteps echoing throughout the grotto. Opening his arms, the man spun around. He looked upward, staring into the falling rain. And with an audible *smack* of his lips, raised a finger, "Although the place could do with a little less -"

THUNK!

Freya leapt into the air before the man finished speaking. Her feet pressed against the canopy for leverage. Jade eyes shimmered with fury. Raising a finger to her mouth, she breathed *magic* onto the digits. Coating them with power before swiping the digits against the

tri-pronged javelin. Sending wisp-like tendrils of magic spiraling along the glowing weapon. And in a single swift motion, moving fast enough that Ryuko barely saw a thing until she *slammed* into the ground, she thrust her javelin, both hands gripping the jeweled shaft, through the man's heart.

All but cracking the floor.

"Excellent effort!"

Her breath hitched when the man's hand patted her shoulder, "Although, as a matter of opinion, you should have gone for the head. Better luck next time, I'm afraid."

Ryuko was *relieved* when the bastard didn't attack Freya. But that didn't change anything. It didn't make her forget everything he did. Not just to her and Mickey and, sure, maybe even Gilgamesh, but to Lindblum. What he *wanted* to do. Her lips pulled back into a snarl. Anger flushed through her heart. The crimson bang above her left eye brightened. And with both hands gripping the Scissor Blade, she sneered, "Why the hell are you here?"

"I am here on, shall we say, official business."

He didn't interfere with the dragoon's efforts to return to her companions. As she rejoined Ryuko and the other two, less important, people, he raised two fingers. One on each hand. No more. No less. A purposeful amount. Thus, when four sets of eyes watched his every moment, enjoyed a cursory moment of amusement before dragging them together, "According to legend, Burmecia's Keyhole dwells where the kings of old eternally slumber. Where the magistrate began their rebellion."

"Unfortunately, its location eludes my grasp."

A hush enveloped the grotto as he pointed not at Ryuko or the dragoon, but the other two children, "Perhaps one of you might be of assistance?"

“You monster!”

Terra snarled at the threat. That could only mean this man was working with the masked boy! In a burst of golden cubes and scintillating rings of light, Earthshaker manifested. Holding the Keyblade in a familiar stance, the bronze weapon rising and falling with every sneering breath, he saw Rainfell materialize in Aqua’s hand. But never, not for a moment, did he look away from the man. No, this guy was a monster. Because only a monster could waltz away from getting stabbed in the heart like it was nothing.

“We’re not going to let you anywhere NEAR the Keyhole!”

An ominous silence enveloped the grotto.

But eventually the man spoke, and it sent chills down Terra’s spin.

“Ryuko didn’t tell you my name?”

It resembled nothing more than a flickering of the light. But Terra saw the man’s expression darken. For a moment, the maniacal smirk became something *e/se*. A monstrous expression that caused Earthshaker to briefly tremble. Then, as a bead of sweat trickled down his face, everything returned to normal.

“And to think we’d separated on such amiable terms.”

A frown played itself upon the man’s somber façade at the youth’s harsh words. Clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth, he clapped his hands together, the sound reverberating off the cavernous walls, before extending a friendly smile, “But alas, in the interest of fairness, permit me to stand on ceremony and introduce myself nonetheless.”

In the blink of an eye, between two beats of a heart, he *vanished*.

“What!?”

It was Aqua who voiced their collective surprise when the man disappeared. As the darkness faded into nothingness, she vaulted backwards, eyes searching back and forth. With Rainfell held across her body, she moved until her back pressed against Terra's, limiting the chance for a surprise attack, "Where did he go?"

"Izunia's the name."

Reappearing upon the muzzle of one of the Burmecian statues, a queen judging by her figure, Ardyn crouched, a smile stretching across his face. With one arm propped against his knee and the other holding his fedora, he playfully tilted his head, "Ardyn Izunia. And thus, with introductions in order, I confess my surprise, Ryuko. According to my sources, you've been training underneath a Keyblade master. A... Beatrix... if memory serves."

Ryuko's heart *twitched*.

"How the hell do you know that!?"

"A trade secret, I'm afraid," Ardyn grinned at Ryuko's growing frustration. He could feel it. The darkness lurking within the depth of her heart. A symphony of shadows waiting for the proper moment, "One I'm certain, upon learning, will fill your hearts with nightmarish terror."

"You think we're afraid of you?"

Magic danced upon Rainfell. It shimmered across the Keyblade as Aqua scoffed, refusing to believe even a single word, "Your darkness is strong. But even so, we'll stop you!"

Ardyn couldn't help but chuckle, a friendly gesture, at the blue haired girl's ineffective threat. Grunting as he pushed himself back onto his feet, he casually brushed dust and errant dirt from his clothing. Then, with a click of his tongue, returned to the matter at hand, "Ryuko! If I might be so bold as to ask you a question! A rather important one at that!"

He remembered the Scissor Blade well. To the untrained amateur, for all intents and purposes, it was nothing more than an exceptionally lethal blade. One, perhaps, capable of achieving miraculous accomplishments. But despite such supernatural and alien power, it lacked the capabilities of the Keyblade. Thus, he was caught in a crossroads of thought. A quandary that plucked at his heart. Ryuko was training underneath a Keyblade Master. One of the stronger ones. Yet she was threatening him with the Scissor Blade. Not, as he'd expected, her very own Keyblade.

Stomping his boot against the edge of the statue's muzzle, he cupped one hand around his mouth, "Where is your Keyblade?"

"Tch!"

Ryuko *knew* Ardyn's bullshit better than anybody else. The bastard was trying to get under her skin! Make her angry and pissed off! With a snort, she flipped the Scissor Blade around before tossing it into her left hand, ["Fine! Have it your way!"](#)

Taking a metaphorical breath, she searched for the power deep inside her heart.

And once it was within reach, *grasped* it with all her strength.

Snapping her wrist, fingers curled into claws, Ryuko matched Ardyn's arrogant smirk. Then doubled. And with an angrily grin on her face, chuckled furiously as her Keyblade manifested alongside twinkling crimson stars, "Oh? What's the matter, jackass!"

The Keyblade... *her* Keyblade... didn't look anything like Terra or Aqua's. Hell, it wasn't anything like Beatrix's Save the Queen! It possessed a deep, almost blood red, crimson color stretching from keychain to blade. Black highlights swirled around the handle. Jagged, razor-sharp wings covered the Keyblade, spiraling around the central blade, gleaming brilliantly in what sunlight filtered through the grotto. But the handle... the comforting metal resting in her fingers... was identical to the Scissor Blades. Both of them. As if

somehow, deep within her heart, that was the only weapon she could hold.

Threadcutter.

An awesome name despite whatever Beatrix and Steiner thought!

“You look surprised!”

She crossed Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade in front of her chest. The blades *grinding* against each other. And when Ardyn didn't answer, shouted at the top of her lungs, “I didn't spend the last month doing nothing! I've been training! And now I'm gonna use everything Beatrix taught me to kick your ass! You can count on that!”

Unknown Report 4

Unknown Report 4

“In your hand, you hold this blade...”

As she grabbed Save the Queen, Ryuko noticed how strange the Keyblade felt. Like it weighed almost nothing. Maybe it was because of magic. Or maybe it was because Beatrix drilled into her head that Keyblades are created from the heart. Which was still pretty much magic.

Almost forgotten memories danced across Beatrix's eye as she repeated her master's words. A hint of her own past. Long before she accepted the heavy burden of responsibility which came with the Keyblade, “So long as you have the makings, then through this simple act...”

In the blink of an eye, a single beat of her heart, Ryuko was no longer in Alexandria.

“What the hell!?”

Her question was smothered by the surrounding darkness. It echoed gently, disappearing into the shadowy abyss. The oppressive silence pushed against her heart. It whispered thoughts and things into her mind. The place felt familiar. Like she'd been here before. Lowering her arm, Save the Queen nowhere to be found, she took one step forward, just enough to loosen the soreness in her shoulders, before reaching for the Scissor Blade dangling on her neck. Only it wasn't there. Her fingers brushed nothing but the skin-tight shirt.

“Damn it!”

Cold panic rushed through her heart. How could she lose the Scissor Blade? The damn necklace was almost impossible to get off! At least not without tearing the freaking thing off her neck! Something she

would have *definitely* remembered! Without the slightest hesitation, she unzipped her jacket. She patted down her shirt, thinking that maybe the necklace somehow got caught in the fabric. But before she pulled the skin-tight shirt off her chest, she stiffened at the illuminated stained-glass underneath her sneakers.

It was *Lindblum*.

“Where the hell am I?”

She recognized the Grand Castle in the center of the stained-glass. A nearly perfect representation of the familiar world. Right down to the airships frozen mid-flight and districts around the castle. And across the platform, right near the edge, she saw everyone she’d met in Lindblum. Mickey. Gilgamesh. Basch. Yen Sid. Regent Cid. They were all bunched together in some fancy pose.

It was super creepy and disturbing.

And with that thought, standing alone on the illuminated platform surrounded by infinite darkness, Ryuko remembered *everything*.

“Ugh, this place again...”

Everything was starting to make sense. This creepy and weird place was her heart. So, of course Scissor Blade disappeared into thin air. It wasn’t part of her. And suddenly, just at that moment, Ryuko grumbled. God damn it. If this place was her heart... an infinite darkness with a single speck of light in the middle, she had issues. *Serious* issues. Folding her arms, she tried thinking about everything.

But all she did was scoff.

Maybe she had an anger problem. But that was perfectly normal. She was just a little passionate about everything. Mako never complained about her attitude! Not once! And she should have been the first person to say anything! Unfolding her arms, she kicked the

ground in annoyance. She scoffed. Snorted. Grumbled. In that order. If this was the weird place from her dream, and everything was going to happen in the same boring order, then she *knew* who was about to show their ugly face.

“You goddamn bastard!”

She spun around and *glared* at the cloaked figure standing across the platform, “You KNEW what was going to happen, didn’t you?”

“Everything happens for a reason,” the man casually stepped to her left, never getting closer. The two chains dangling from his hood shifted as he continued staring straight into her eyes, **“Although, at times, we ourselves may not understand why.”**

Something was different this time. Maybe her memories were wrong. Or some part of her heart didn’t *want* to remember the dream. But that didn’t change anything! She wasn’t going to shut her mouth because of a single bad feeling! Snarling with barely concealed hatred, she clenched her trembling fingers into fists, “I don’t need to understand anything! If that freak hadn’t ruined everything, none of this would be happening! Everybody would be fine!”

“And maybe...”

Her anger dissipated as, for a moment, several good memories touched her heart, “... maybe I wouldn’t have met Mickey, Yen Sid or Beatrix. Maybe I would have spent the rest of my life not knowing anything about magic or Keyblades. But stuff like that’s not worth crap. Not against losing my world.”

“But what about Lindblum?”

The cloaked man pointed towards the stained-glass platform, **“If not for you, Regent Cid wouldn’t have been drawn away from the festival. He would likely have perished at the hands of Ardyn Izunia.”**

“Without YOU, Mickey wouldn’t have stayed in Lindblum. He would have gone back to Yen Sid. Continued training without broadening his horizons.”

Each word echoed in the surrounding darkness. Carrying a heavy weight as Ryuko found herself unable to speak, **“Gilgamesh would have died an ignoble death against someone a lot stronger than himself. Nobody would have ever known his name. Thousands of innocent people... an entire world... the balance between light and darkness... would have been lost before Ardyn was defeated. The destruction of your world saved another.”**

“You can take that balance nonsense and shove it up your ass!”

Spittle flew out of her mouth as she *shouted*, “The bastard took everything from me! MY world is gone! It’s never coming back! Lindblum being saved doesn’t change that!”

“Sheesh, aren’t you selfish?”

The hooded man’s entire demeanor changed when he *whined*, **“I was trying to act all ominous! Keep an air of mystery and intrigue! But no, you had to take the wind out of my sails!”**

“This isn’t a freaking game!”

Her sneakers slipped against the stained-glass as she rushed across the platform. The freaky asshole was mocking her! Every word was full of shit! From the moment he appeared using magic or something, he’d *known* everything! He knew the masked bastard would attack her world! That she would lose everything! And now he was fucking messing with her? Cocking her arm over her shoulder, Ryuko felt her knuckles crack from the pressure. Energy *pulsed* through her muscles as she imagined, with every fiber of her being, punching the smugness off the guy’s face!

“In any case, you stand at a crossroads.”

“What the -”

When the bastard vanished right before her fist smashed his nose into blood and broken cartilage, Ryuko was surprised. Then embarrassed she fell for something so stupid! And for the second time! Snarling with barely controlled frustration, she vaulted forward. The stained-glass squeaked underneath her fingers as she flipped head over heels, landing quickly enough to watch the bastard calmly stroll in the opposite direction, **“Your heart is strong. For good or evil... light or darkness or the nothingness between... that power is yours and yours alone. Yet you’re not quite ready for what’s about to come. But that’s perfectly fine!”**

Flamboyance clung to the cloaked man when he stopped walking, turned around, and extended his arms, **“You’ve still got plenty of time before the door opens!”**

“I don’t care about that crap!”

“Is revenge really *that* important?”

Shrugging at his own question, the man raised his hand, **“It won’t bring back Satsuki or Mako. Or anyone else. If, of course, they’re truly gone in the first place. You know what I’m talking about, right? The whole ‘hearts are connected across many worlds’ speech Beatrix gives every day.”**

“I’m DONE talking to you!”

It took considerable effort not to curse at the bastard. But she still snorted. Her mouth still twisted into a sneer. It was bad enough listening to his bullshit about her world needing to be destroyed. But his cocky attitude... the smugness *oozing* from every stupid word leaving his lips... was pissing her off! She could *feel* the urge to break the asshole’s nose despite knowing he’d teleport at the last second, “Because I’ve figured out *who* you are!”

“What!?”

The guy actually *sounded* shocked, **“You have!?”**

“Yeah,” she thrust both hands into her jacket, shifted her legs outwards and snorted, “You’re nothing more than a figment of my imagination! If this place is my heart... or some other part of me... then none of this is really happening! Because everything you’ve said about Satsuki, Mako and revenge... shit, even about my powers... is stuff I already knew! Stupid crap swirling inside my head!”

“You really need to broaden your horizons.”

Feigning pain at the insult, the hooded man waved his hands, **“To you, everything is some ‘big conspiracy’ or ‘my mind’s playing tricks on me’ or ‘I have to find out who killed my dad.’ Sometimes you gotta trust your heart about these sorts of things. Take a chance! Make friends! Anyway, I’m talking in the dark. Contrary to expectations, I didn’t see any of this coming.”**

“Hmm... what was the phrase?”

The man propped both hands against his waist. He leaned backwards and groaned before, with sudden resignation, exclaiming, **“Oh, right! You took destiny and kicked its butt! In fact, I’m fairly certain none of this was meant to happen. Your world’s destruction... Lindblum... Ardyn Izunia... things are unfolding in a very unexpected manner.”**

Ryuko felt *something* about the cloaked man’s posture suddenly change.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means you should be *really* careful.”

Everything suddenly flickered. The world inverted, turned static and lost coloration. And before she could blink, or even turn around, the

guy was standing right behind her, **“The door might remain closed. But don’t go losing your way. Not even for a moment.”**

“... of taking, its wielder you shall one day be made.”

She blinked as Beatrix finished giving the traditional speech. Jeez, was everything that weird around here? She understood tradition. Satsuki spoke about tradition all the time at Honnouji Academy. But was the speech necessary? Ryuko didn’t know. And quite frankly, the whole ‘accepting this honor’ blew right over her head. Looking at the Keyblade in her hand, Ryuko gave it an experimental swing only to feel nothing different. She didn’t feel any stronger. Thinking hard, concentrating on the light Beatrix said everybody had inside them, she turned the Keyblade over in her hand.

“Huh? That’s it?”

Handing back Save the Queen, she examined her hand. Huh, she didn’t *feel* any different. She clenched her fingers. Once. Twice. Then a third time, “So... did I pass or something?”

“Concentrate on the light dwelling within your heart.”

The rose-colored metal of Save the Queen glimmered brilliantly against the rising sun. Her Keyblade’s silver handle reflected the ambient lighting, transforming the polished luster into something majestic. Raising her other hand, one finger pointed at her student’s heart, Beatrix added, “Grasp that power. Believe yourself capable of wielding the Keyblade. Do not think of the Keyblade as a weapon. Rather, your hopes and dreams materialized. Your desires to protect those you cherish crystallized into reality.”

“... alright, I think I get it.”

Ryuko didn’t quite believe her own words. Maybe she still didn’t get a lot of this stuff. Magic was *really* difficult, despite how easily Beatrix wove fireballs, pillars of light and freaking tidal waves out of nothing. But even if everything was confusing, she wasn’t about to back

down. Not when this was her best shot at finding Satsuki, Mako and everyone. Bolstered by her only dream, she cleared her mind. She took a deep breath, releasing all the tension in her heart. And mimicking Beatrix's pose, right down to how her fingers moved, Ryuko grasped the air.

For a moment, her fingers touched nothing.

A sense of overwhelming failure began settling inside her heart.

And then, in an explosion of crimson stars, she was holding a Keyblade.

"Impressive."

The compliment escaped Beatrix's lips alongside a faint, nearly imperceptible, smirk. Brushing chestnut brown hair behind her ear, she observed every detail of Ryuko's rather unique Keyblade. The blade was a vibrant crimson reminiscent of fresh blood. Dark, almost black, marks swirled around the handle. A grip which, to no small amount of amusement, resembled the handles of a scissor. And in direct contrast to Save the Queen, with roses emblazoned along the blade, jagged protrusions spiraled around Ryuko's Keyblade.

"You've exceeded my expectations," lowering Save the Queen until the Keyblade brushed against the grass, Beatrix allowed a modicum of pride into her smirk, "Now all that remains is the name."

"A name, huh?"

Ryuko didn't know what Beatrix expected. She wasn't really good with names. But that wasn't why her fingers trembled despite her best efforts at stopping them. Or why she suddenly felt terrible and pathetic. But when she turned the Keyblade over in her hand, Ryuko saw the keychain brushing against her wrist. To most people, even Beatrix, the crimson attachment looked like a stylized four-pointed star. Nothing important or significant. Just like the weird crystal

attached to Save the Queen. But seeing something so familiar reminded her of what she'd lost.

"Yeah... it has a name."

It was there. The name was whispered from the depths of her heart. A single word that made perfect sense. And without looking away from the Keyblade, Ryuko gathered her courage and took a deep breath, "... Threadcutter."

A tense silence enveloped the training field before Beatrix callously dismissed Save the Queen, "An acceptable name."

Ryuko's mouth twitched.

"It's an awesome name!"

Chapter 4.5

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/e/e5/Sc00016.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140315010601>]

The Keyblade... *her* Keyblade... didn't look anything like Terra or Aqua's. Hell, it wasn't anything like Beatrix's Save the Queen! It possessed a deep, almost blood red, crimson color stretching from keychain to blade. Black highlights swirled around the handle. Jagged, razor-sharp wings covered the Keyblade, spiraling around the central blade, gleaming brilliantly in what sunlight filtered through the grotto. But the handle... the comforting metal resting in her fingers... was identical to the Scissor Blades. Both of them. As if somehow, deep within her heart, that was the only weapon she could hold.

Threadcutter.

It was an awesome and kickass name no matter what Beatrix said!

"I didn't spend the last month doing nothing!"

She crossed Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade in front of her chest with an ear-deafening *screech*. The blades ground against each other, shooting out crimsons sparks and ruby wisps of magic as she exclaimed, "I've been training! And now, I'm gonna use everything Beatrix taught me to kick your ass! You can count on that!"

For a moment, silence reigned throughout Gizamaluke's Grotto.

"Impressive! Most impressive!"

If he was perturbed by the knowledge Ryuko now possessed the Keyblade, one of the most potent weapons throughout the realm of light, Ardyn kept such information secret, "... you've grown stronger.

In fact, I'd say you've far surpassed that mouse. There's no question Beatrix taught you well, Ryuko. But, if you'll indulge my curiosity..."

The rain battered his clothing as he stood back up, replacing the fedora upon his head with casual indifference, "... might I inquire why you're here."

Ryuko's eyes twitched, "It's none of your damn business!"

"Last I checked, even Burmecia's dragon knights were forbidden from entering Gizamaluke's Grotto. Surely you didn't come all this way for revenge," Ardyn allowed the true meaning of his words reach their intended audience. And pursing his lips together, clicked his tongue, "Or have you come for the boy? The masked youth bearing a Keyblade?"

Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade trembled as she struggled not to show *anything* to the bastard, "What makes you think we're gonna tell you crap?"

Ardyn basked in the dark frustration enveloping Ryuko's scarred heart. The girl wished nothing more than answers. She desired information on the masked boy, no matter the price or cost. So long as it granted her retribution. And yet, she refused to take that final step. She stopped herself from accepting darkness into her hear. And now, after but a single month, she wielded the Keyblade.

His smirk twisted *monstrously*.

"Ah, well, to those of you interested in the boy, you just missed him."

Clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth, he basked in Ryuko's growing anger, "He was here but an hour ago. Unfortunately, he took leave when I made my reasons for coming to this world available."

"How do you know him!?"

Earthshaker's keychain jingled as Terra swept the Keyblade backwards. Damn it! The thick darkness enveloping Ardyn Izunia was frightening. Simply standing near the guy threatened to smother his heart. Now he understood why Master Eraqus was concerned, "Is he working for you!?"

"Our goals simply align... to a certain extent."

With a smack of his lips, Ardyn brushed aside the master-in-training's disrespectful commands. There was no question the youth was well-trained. His stance... the way his fingers held the Keyblade... was intimately familiar. One of the old, traditional styles. Suggesting the youth's master was one of the old guard. For a moment, he pondered the question. He scratched his chin, thoughtfully searching the depths of his heart for further information, before nonchalantly adding, "And speaking of the masked *boy*, tell me, has Ryuko confessed the tragedy of her world?"

"Tragedy?"

Terra scoffed at the ridiculous question, "What the hell are you talking -"

"You goddamn bastard!"

The ground *shook* as Ryuko leapt towards Ardyn. Using her own, admittedly superhuman strength, she cleared the statue's face in the blink of an eye. With her toes curled inside both of her muddied and soaked sneakers, she touched down onto the muzzle. One knee almost touching the ancient stone. Rushing forward upon impact, stormy sapphire eyes glaring right into the bastard's yellow, she crossed her arms. And with a twitch of her fingers and *snick* of metal upon metal, the Scissor Blade transformed into Decapitation Mode. Crimson tendrils of light surrounded Threadcutter. Clashing against the darkness *oozing* from the bastard's heart.

Her lips twisting into a vicious snarl at the psychopath's friendly smirk, she swung both weapons without hesitation. The glass-

shattering *boom* of displaced air ricocheting throughout the antechamber.

Only for both weapons, Keyblade and Scissor Blade, to *stop* against a claymore.

“While you’re here, Ryuko,” wind and rain battered their bodies as Ardyn leaned forward until his chin hovered above the phantasmal claymore. Amusement clung to his voice, matching his malicious grin, “Allow me to confess *why* I’ve come to Burmecia...”

“I don’t care!”

With a derisive snort, Ryuko reversed her grip on the Scissor Blade and Threadcutter. Her jacket rippled, not from the screaming wind buffeting her face, but the power coursing through her heart. The sheer *determination* to break Ardyn’s nose. Viciously, sadistically and with as much enjoyment as humanly possible! The knowledge that Ardyn was seeking the Keyhole to destroy Burmecia fueled her resolves. Spittle flew between her snarling lips as she leaned forward, her own face inches from the bastard’s. Anger danced across her eyes as, without warning, she let go of the Scissor Blade.

The sudden movement caused the psychopathic asshole to glance at the hardened Life Fiber weapon.

Which was just what she wanted.

“CLIMHAZZARD!!!”

The chaotic explosion of magic rippled down her Keyblade. It ricocheted against the bastard’s claymore, *shattering* the ephemeral weapon. And, for just a second, but more than enough time to memorize the image, Ardyn looked surprised. His eyes widened. His smirk vanished. Then she swung downwards, sending the asshole flying across the antechamber, slamming into the wall above another statue.

“Tch!”

As the Scissor Blade bounced off the statue beneath her sneakers, Ryuko wrapped her fingers around the handle. She leapt backwards, sliding down the rain-slicked stone armor before landing in a crouch next to Freya, “Damn, still gotta work on it.”

“What was -”

“It’s something Beatrix taught me,” Ryuko answered Aqua before she finished, “It’s still not perfect. But it packs one hell of a punch!”

Freya shook her head, sending streams of rain dripping onto her coat. The ridiculousness of Ryuko’s answer boggled her mind. Climhazzard, if that *was* the technique’s true name, was powerful. And Ryuko confessed it was incomplete? Staring at the damage inflicted by Ardyn Izunia’s impact, she snorted, “It appears Master Beatrix has taught you -”

“The reason I’m here, Ryuko, is because of *you*.”

A disturbing twilight enveloping the grotto. The rain dripping into puddles of mud turned silent as Ardyn emerged from the smoke, completely unharmed despite the fervent ferocity of the attack. And then the *darkness* manifested from his heart. It clung to his body like water. Writhed against his skin as he sauntered forward, eventually coming to a quick and vicious *halt* upon the statue’s muzzle.

“The mouse and swordsman interfered with my long-awaited retribution.”

Ardyn chuckled as the shadows in the grotto’s darkest corners, where secrets and nightmares were passed through hushed whispers, lengthened, “But the regent lives because of her. It was her interference... her persistence... which stole from me the opportunity. And for that, she will suffer.”

Ryuko snarled, “I’m not afraid of you!”

“Ah, but you *should* be...”

As his words echoed within the furthest depths of Ryuko's heart, Ardyn teleported from his perch upon the Burmecian statue. His boots stomped against muddied water as, with darkness dripping from his very soul, he reappeared across the antechamber. And with that movement, induced an overwhelming sense of terror. The manifestation of his hatred filled the grotto with reckless abandon. His skin paled to a deathly white. Shadows dripped from his eyes and mouth. Yet it was his smile, a daemonic grin, which unnerved Ryuko the most. Memories of Lindblum slammed against her heart when the bastard tilted his head sideways.

“However, killing you right now, as you currently are, will bring me scant satisfaction.”

Gently raising his hand, Ardyn chuckled, a sound more akin to a hiss of air, as dozens of swords, spears, axes and other weapons manifested. Each shimmering with the same crimson darkness as the repaired broadsword clasped between his fingers. They floated in the darkness surrounding him. Each nothing more than a flickering thought from skewering the beings desperate to stop him, “Before you accept death's cold embrace, I will take away everything you cherish. You will watch those you love die. One by one. Starting with your friends...”

“Like hell you will!”

A burst of movement brought Terra sliding in front of Ryuko before his mind finished processing the situation, “We're going to stop you!”

“Stop me, you say?”

Mockery *clung* to Ardyn's tone, “... tell me, my boy. If the great Yen Sid couldn't defeat me, what chance do you possess?”

“So, what if you're strong!?”

Terra snarled. He didn't come this far... train for years with Aqua and Ven under Master Eraqus... to run away like a coward. Raising Earthshaker across his body, he grimaced, "We're NOT going to let you anywhere near Ryuko!"

"Is that so?"

It was there for but a moment. A reminiscence of something in his past. A faded memory which brought to mind his brother's face. Shadowed and warped by time into something almost unrecognizable. But Ardyn, with callous disregard, effortlessly brushed it aside. With a nonchalant wave of his hand, he intercepted the condensed magic shooting from the blue haired girl's Keyblade. The spikes of razor-sharp ice shattered against darkness as he turned around. But after sauntering a few steps, his boot slammed against the ground with a dull yet loud *thump*, "Well then, by all means, throw away your lives defending a monster."

Rainfell shifted in Aqua's hand, "What?"

"I came to Burmecia to gauge the darkness in Ryuko's heart," Ardyn smirked over his shoulder at the target of their conversation. Mirth danced within his amber eyes at the hatred and venom coursing through the girl. And with a chortle reminiscent of mockery, added without care, "I know not where her darkness originates. But heed my words, girl. Your friend, the one you'd risk your lives protecting, is more of a monster than myself."

Anger flushed through Terra's heart, "You're the only monster here!"

"If you say so..."

With a flamboyant flourish, Ardyn turned around, simultaneously sweeping the red scarf over his shoulder. Sauntering towards the antechamber's entrance, the sounds of his footsteps echoing against the hallowed halls, a moment, one that felt like an eternity, passed through the grotto before he spread his arms apart, "In any case, as a token of my appreciation, please accepting this parting gift."

Darkness *enveloped* Gizamaluke's Grotto.

The light shining from Threadcutter - hell, from all of their Keyblades - illuminated their surroundings. Making it possible to know *something* was happening. But that simply wasn't good enough. It was like standing in a thick, disgusting fog. One that made her heart quiver. Gritting her teeth at the strange feeling, Ryuko moved until her back was pressing against Aqua's, "Damn it! I can't see anything!"

"Don't lose focus," Freya leapt backwards, placing herself at Terra's blind spot, "Be ready for anything!"

Terra glanced back and forth, searching for *what* was hiding in the darkness. His eyes strained to pierce the encroaching shadows. The light shimmering throughout Earthshaker lessened the darkness. It soothed his mind. Calmed his nerves. And allowed him, with a sharp intake of air, to finally spot, standing on the edge of his line of sight, twin sets of glowing crimson eyes.

"Look out!"

Monstrous roars stabbed against his heart as the darkness permeating Gizamaluke's Grotto lessened. Allowing them to see the monsters standing on either side of Ardyn Izunia. Shadows surrounded the quadruped creatures. Covering everything but their crimson eyes in a thick, disturbing haze. The darkness clung to their bodies. It writhed through the air. And then, as if to taunt them, Ardyn flicked his hand, dissipating the shadows. Leaving the monsters exposed. And with that, their bright red eyes shifted to a nauseating yellow. Their dark purple and black bodies rippled with muscles. A man of magenta tentacles wrapped around their heads. Rows of razor-sharp teeth sprouted from their snapping jaws as they stomped upon the ground, the chains sealed around their ankles shaking with each impact.

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/9/93/A_fragmentary_passage

[_08_BBSFM.png/800px-A_fragmentary_passage_08_BBSFM.png\]](#)

“What are these things?”

When one of the monsters turned in his direction, Terra almost flinched, “Unversed?”

“Nothing so barbaric, I assure you.”

Amusement played across Ardyn’s face as he pivoted and, with both arms extended, announced, “I give you... the Hunters of the Dark. Heartless from the Realm of Darkness. Monsters born from the darkness resting within the hearts of men and women alike.”

Aqua’s breath hitched, “Heartless?”

“I don’t care if they’re Heartless or Unversed,” Ryuko spat between her feet, Threadcutter pointed not at the Heartless, but Ardyn, “We’re gonna kick their asses! And then we’re gonna take down the bastard!”

“Eloquently stated, Ryuko. However, I’ve other business to attend.”

Ardyn smacked his lips together in thought before, with a snap of his fingers, a corridor of writhing darkness materialized at his back. Brushing dust of his shoulders, he tipped the brim of his fedora, “Thus, I bid you a fond farewell.”

[The Heartless *vanished* alongside Ardyn.](#)

Aqua was the first to react.

“FREEZE!!!”

Her eyes shimmered as ice *flowed* around Rainfell, streaming against her Keyblade like water. As the keychain attached to the handle jingled, she lurched forward, swinging her arm at the Heartless. Releasing the powerful magic alongside a faint trickle of wind. But it wasn’t enough. The Heartless saw it... *sensed* it coming.

In the surrounding darkness, both Hunters of the Dark suddenly changed directions. They moved independently of each other. One darting around the statues ahead of the bone-chilling ice expanding against the walls with every strike. The other sprinting around the antechamber, glowing crimson eyes tracking her Keyblade as she shot Blizzara after Blizzara, frustration growing with every near hit.

And then, with an earth-shattering roar, crashed *through* the ceiling.

She gasped as the Hunter of the Dark disappeared into the thunderstorm outside Gizamaluke's Grotto, sending chunks of rock and stone crashing to the ground, "They're heading toward the city!"

Anger dominated Freya's heart. To allow the Heartless to escape into the city would threaten thousands of innocents! The King's life would be threatened! As the edges of her muzzle rippled, she pivoted with a lurch. She bent forward, knees slightly bent. And in one swift motion, the displaced pulse of air sending a burst of wind through the grotto, she was hovering inches away from the beast. Magic enveloped her javelin, silhouetting the tri-pronged blade against the monster looming ever closer. Her clawed fingers tightened around the weapon's shaft as she swung downwards, releasing a torrent of cherry-colored magic against the Hunter of the Dark.

Only for the monster to shrug it off.

"No!"

Landing upon one of the statues, Freya grimaced as she watched, helpless for the infinitesimal moment required to jump, the remaining Heartless leap towards the ceiling, "We mustn't allow the other to escape!"

"Already on it!"

An infuriated snarl escaped Ryuko's throat as she shifted her weight, sneakers sliding against the mud-covered floor, and *threw*

Threadcutter at the remaining Hunter of the Dark. The Keyblade spiraled through the darkness, light pulsing along its razor-sharp edge, towards the Heartless. And in return, the primitive monster growled when the weapon... the bane of its existence... came within inches of its body. But neither excitement nor mockery passed through its mind, devoid of emotions and feelings, at the close call. It simply resumed its ascent towards the ceiling. Blood-red eyes locked upon the thunderstorm raging outside the grotto.

Then something *grabbed* its tail.

“Where do... you think... you’re going!?”

Ryuko allowed Threadcutter to vanish. The Keyblade already served its purpose. A reverse teleport. Something *real* handy for situations like this. Gnashing her teeth from the effort of holding something struggling every step of the way, she wrapped both hands around the Heartless’s massive tail. She gripped something that wasn’t flesh, but damn well felt like a ton of muscles, with enough strength to change their combined momentum. Her fingers carved into the magenta-colored hide. And with a primal shout of her own, rearing both arms behind her head, *threw* the Hunter of the Dark in the opposite direction.

“WE... AIN’T... FINISHED!!!”

With a *whump*, the Heartless smashed against the ground. A sound akin to cracking bones echoed throughout the antechamber when it bounced upwards, body twisted and fanged mouth partially open. Mud sprayed through the air when crimson eyes twisted yellow, the resounding impact disrupting the writhing shadows. Then, before it could right itself, Ryuko appeared next to it, Threadcutter curled behind her back.

“NOW... HEEL!!!”

Swinging the Keyblade like a freaking baseball bat, Ryuko snorted, traces of a grin on her face, as the Heartless flew across the

antechamber. Threadcutter continued its trajectory, her right hand momentarily leaving the Keyblade, while she watched the monster slam face-first against a statue.

And then she winced when the statue, a priceless Burmecia monument, collapsed onto the Heartless.

“Uh... oops.”

She didn’t know whether Freya was going to blame her for destroying the statue. Maybe stopping both Heartless would get her out of trouble. But coming up with a good excuse could wait until after they solved the problem. Yanking the Scissor Blade out of the floor, then collapsing it down with a flick of her wrist, she dropped the weapon into her jacket, zipped the pocked shut, before turning around, “Aqua, think you and Freya can handle the other one?”

Aqua watched the rubble covering the Heartless fall still, “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Ryuko rolled her shoulders, “While you’re kicking its ass, me and Terra will take care of this one!”

The master-in-training hesitated. It was dangerous to split into two groups. The Heartless were powerful. But, at the same time, she *knew* Ryuko was right. They needed to stop the other monster before it reached the city. The longer she waited to make a decision, the more lives were placed into jeopardy. And with a resolute nod, she depressed the piece of armor upon her left shoulder, “All right!”

An aura of brilliant light encompassed Aqua as she reappeared, garbed within her Keyblade Armor. Nodding at Ryuko, then Terra, each movement accompanied by the noticeable *clank* of metal shifting against itself, she grasped Rainfell with both hands. She held the metallic blue Keyblade in front of her opaque visor, light crackling along its surface, before allowing it to fall towards the ground. Where it transformed in a burst of sapphire magic.

“Terra! Ryuko! We’ll come back as soon as possible!”

She vaulted onto the glider, throwing her entire weight onto the hovering platform. Turning the glider around with a twisting of her wrists, the royal blue energy pulsing from the twin engines, Aqua waited until Freya leapt onto the back. She hesitated just long enough for the dragoon to find her balance, for a clawed hand to grab her shoulder, before leaning backwards and *rocketing* through the broken ceiling of Gizamaluke’s Grotto.

As Aqua and Freya disappeared into the thunderstorm, Terra turned around, glaring at the Hunter of the Dark. If he’d acted as fast as Ryuko, the other Heartless might not have escaped the grotto. If he hadn’t hesitated for a split second when Ardyn Izunia vanished into that darkness, both Heartless could have been stopped instead of only the one. They... Aqua, Freya and Ryuko... could have defeated the monsters together. Shaking his head, redoubling his grip on Earthshaker as the Hunter of the Dark recovering, rubble and pieces of the broken statue rolling off its back, he slid next to Ryuko.

“You got a plan?”

“Nope,” Ryuko propped Threadcutter against her shoulder before pointing the Keyblade at the Heartless, “But we have Keyblades. So, if we can chop off its head, it’s gonna stay dead!”

“Heh... sounds like a plan.”

Terra cracked a smirk. He couldn’t help it. Ryuko’s confidence was contagious, “In that case, let’s give this thing everything we got! So, on my signal, I’ll hit it high...”

Ryuko returned his grin, “... and I’ll hit it low!”

Last edited: May 25, 2018

Chapter 4.6

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/e/ef/EP25-Preview24.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140822034228>]

[“God... damn... crap!”](#)

Ryuko cursed as fast as the words formed in her mind. Pumping her arms, she ducked underneath a swirling sphere of pure darkness. Threadcutter sliced upwards, sending the shadowy projectile into the ceiling. As it exploded with enough force to displace the surrounding thunderstorm, she slid across the ground. Her knees dragged against muddied water. Pulling her mouth into a snarl, she vaulted backwards, clearing another sphere of darkness, the magical attack nearly grazing her foot.

“Damn it!”

Landing in a crouch, she spat on the ground before immediately sprinting in the opposite direction around the antechamber, “Enough of this shit!”

Frustration pulsed through her heart as she waited until the familiar *whump*. Until the Hunter of the Dark released another volley of darkness. And when that happened, she planted her sneaker against the ground, kicking up a puddle of water, and leapt into the sky. As rain battered her face, strands of black and crimson hair fluttering across her vision, Ryuko twisted lengthwise. She flipped over the spheres of darkness, arms splayed outwards and back arched. And with a vicious snarl exposing her full annoyance, briefly locking eyes with Terra on the other side of the grotto, snapped her wrist.

Flames already streaming around Threadcutter.

“BURN!!!!”

Snarling at the darkness pushing against her heart, she squeezed her fingers around the Keyblade. In a flash of sound akin to a gunshot, fireballs, each the size of her head, shot towards the Hunter of the Dark. The heat brushed against her wrist. It caused her to wince. But she didn't stop firing. Not once! Not until Terra raised Earthshaker overhead, crackles of thunder sparking around his Keyblade.

“THUNDER!!!”

Lightning crashed against the Heartless. Sparks and electrical currents raced across its purple and black hide. Its flesh burned from her fire magic, shadowy muscles sizzling with every subsequent fireball. Scorch marks from Terra's lightning magic caused smoke and crackling *pops* of burning skin to fill the antechamber. And underneath the overwhelming assault, its knees buckled. The chains wrapped around its ankles momentarily touched the floor.

But it wasn't enough.

Stomping its front claws against the ground over and over again, the powerful Heartless reared back and *roared*. It was a monstrous sound. An ear-deafening scream that loosened debris still clinging to the massive hole in the ceiling. And as the dodged the falling rocks and chunks of dirt, leapt backwards, disappearing into the surrounding darkness.

“Damn it!”

Ryuko closed ranks with Terra, their backs touching and Keyblades at the ready. God damn it! The Heartless was stronger than the Unversed the masked bastard summoned underneath what remained of her bitch of a mom's ugly-as-hell house. Resisting magic was one thing, but she'd put everything into Threadcutter when she smashed the Heartless across the freaking grotto! A

goddamn statue fell on top of it! But here it was, moving around the room like nothing happened.

Angrily tightening her fingers around Threadcutter, she looked back and forth, Terra at her back, only to stiffen when something whispered against her heart.

“MOVE!”

Sheets of bitter rain battered her face when the Hunter of the Dark emerged from the shadows enveloping Gizamaluke’s Grotto. A buzz saw of claws and writhing darkness seeking to slice their bodies into several pieces. The rusted chains clasped onto its ankles swung chaotically through the air, snapping back and forth. As they separated in different directions, all but forcing the Heartless to pick a target, Ryuko arrested her momentum with a forceful *stomp* of her sneaker against the ground. Wincing... then snarling... as the Hunter of the Dark’s claws came within inches of her stomach, she flipped Threadcutter into an underhanded grip, spat on the ground, and swung upwards.

Only to miss when the creature leapt *midair* back into the shadows.

“What’s it doing?”

Shifting his weight sideways when the Heartless reappeared on his left, Terra grimaced as he tried... and failed... to track the rapidly-moving creature, “Is it trying to separate us?”

Ryuko snorted before her anger... her hatred and frustration... suddenly vanished.

“I have an idea!”

She didn’t pay attention to Terra’s confusion before stabbing Threadcutter into the ground next to her foot. Cracking her knuckles, head tilted slightly to the left, Ryuko rolled her neck before scoffing, “Just follow my lead!”

It took about five seconds, give or take, for the Hunter of the Dark to take the bait. To rush out of the shadows. Super-strong Heartless or not, in the end, it was nothing more than a wild animal. The damn monster rushed across Gizamaluke's Grotto. It sprinted towards Ryuko, fangs chomping to devour her heart. Razor-sharp claws glistening in the pouring rain.

And Ryuko, standing directly in the dangerous monster's path, cracked an unnerving smirk.

"Aren't you a tough one?"

The antechamber *shook* when she thrust her arms forward and physically intercepted the Hunter of the Dark. The impact knocked her head backwards. Filled her mouth with the coppery taste of blood when she accidentally bit her tongue. But she pushed aside that stupid shit. Gripping both halves of the Heartless's snapping jaw, blood dripped from her fingers, wrapped around the knife-like fangs. Her muscles burned as the bastard took her efforts as a freaking challenge. She gasped for breath between clenched teeth as her knees threatened to buckle against the stupid-as-hell strength.

"But... you..."

Power flushed through her heart with those struggling words. The crimson bang over her left eye shimmered as she flexed her shoulders, bringing the Hunter of the Dark's advance to a screeching halt.

"... ain't... tough... ENOUGH!!!"

Yanking down, twisting her arms counterclockwise, she slammed the Heartless against the ground. The impact cracked the floor. And then, without hesitation, Ryuko grabbed the damn thing's head and did it again. And again. And a fourth time. Blood coated her fingers, oozing down her arms as the Hunter of the Dark tried recovering. It shook its head. Growled with audible fury. But all she did in return, the only thing on her mind, was grabbing the nearest leg. She

wrapped her hands around the limb. Clenched it with all her strength. And, planting her sneakers into the mud, *threw* the Heartless towards Terra.

One step. Two steps.

Terra's lungs burned as he sprinted towards the incoming Heartless. His fingers curled around Earthshaker. His pupils dilated, oxygen flushing his muscles, when he met the Hunter of the Dark. One... two... six... ten... thirteen strikes. In the time it required an arc of lightning to flash across the thunderous heavens, he attacked the Heartless with everything he had. His muscles burned as a brilliant light spilled from the massive Keyblade, connecting with the inner light shimmering in his heart. One-handed. Two-handed. Reversed grip. He didn't hold back anything. He used everything he knew... everything Master Eraqus taught them... against the monster.

Nothing less would suffice.

With one final slash, twisting sideways through the pouring rain, Earthshaker slammed against shadowy flesh, sending the massive Heartless bouncing in the opposite direction.

"... I take it back."

A shuddering grunt ripped through Terra while exhaustion swept across his body. He panted heavily as rain, or possibly sweat, dripped down his face. Holding Earthshaker tightly with both hands, the Keyblade rising and falling alongside his shoulders, he watched the Hunter of the Dark disappear into the shadows. He heard it crash against the wall. He expanded his senses for any sign of movement... any sign of life... before allowing some of the tension to dissipate, "That was a good plan."

"Offering myself as bait always works," Ryuko rolled her eyes as, with a twitch of her bloodied fingers, Threadcutter returned into her possession, "I don't know why, though."

Terra shook his head, water flowing down his face, before looking around, "Yeah... well... we should save the celebrations until after we make sure the Heartless is really dead."

"Good point."

Muttering under her breath, Ryuko groaned in annoyance, "I guess we'd better take a look -"

Two different versions of the Heartless, one bright green and the other deep blue, emerged from the shadows fast enough that she was almost caught off guard by their speed.

Their phantasmal claws sliced into the stone floor, kicking up streams of muddied water. With twin sets of glowing crimson eyes, they attacked independently. Dashing back and forth across the grotto, one of them attacked Terra without hesitating for a second.

And the other never stopping charging *her*.

As the blue copy of the Heartless charged Terra, spinning through the rain like a buzz saw, Ryuko was already two steps ahead of the Heartless. While Terra rolled underneath two pairs of darkness-covered claws, water dripping from his hakama and Keyblade, she instinctively ducked sideways. The moment she noticed the Hunter of the Dark making a beeline towards her, intent on devouring her heart or worse, she shifted her weight and flexed her knees. She remembered every lesson learned dealing with Satsuki's stupid nonsense back at Honnouji Academy. She used the painful lessons learned from getting her ass kicked again and again by Beatrix to dodge the straightforward attack.

But none of that accounted for the Heartless changing directions *midjump*.

But it wasn't enough.

Accompanied by a flash of razor-sharp claws, her shoulder exploded into a fountain of blood.

“Ryuko!”

Dodging around another illusionary clone of the Heartless, Terra sprinted towards Ryuko without a second thought. He pushed himself to his limits, restoration magic twisting emerald paths around Earthshaker, only for an additional two clones, one bright red and the other magenta, to charge out of the darkness, forcing him backwards, “Hold on! I’m coming!”

“Don’t worry about me!”

Spittle flew between her clenched teeth as she shouted at Terra. Damn it! Her shoulder hurt like a bitch! But she wasn’t gonna let this monster beat them!

With curses spewing through the air, she clenched her fingers around Threadcutter and *ignored* the injury. Reducing the normally incapacitating wound to nothing more than a cursory thought in the back of her mind. She didn’t give a crap about the blood streaming down her arm. She’d dealt with far worse wounds. Getting skewered dozens of times by dear old mom until she resembled one of those fancy pincushions put *a lot* of things into perspective.

But that didn’t matter!

The Heartless was faster than expected. It was freaking strong. And, worst of all, it was smart. As she was forced to dodge another physical illusion, this one purposely aiming towards her injured shoulder, she grimaced... frowned... and cursed. All at once. The son of a bitch was mocking them!

It was mocking her!

“God damn it!”

Noticing something move out of the corner of her eye, she swung Threadcutter, magic swirling around the blade, “Enough of this, you piece of -”

The curse died in the back of her throat when the *actual* Hunter of the Dark leapt out of the swirling darkness surrounding Gizamaluke’s Grotto, a massive fireball forming in front of its fang-filled maw.

“What the -”

Particles of shadowy light and darkness spun throughout the blistering flames filling her vision. Lightning and crackling electricity sparked from the center of the chaotic sphere, which expanded until the blazing inferno was larger than the damn thing’s body. Heat rushed across the antechamber. It filled her lungs. Made it hard to breath. Forced her to wince underneath the intense pressure. And, against the deafening cacophony of heat and flames, she heard something similar to a revving engine. A growing *whine* rapidly reaching its climax.

And then, accompanied by a monstrous roar, the Hunter of the Dark snapped its maw shut, releasing the magical fireball with an ear-deafening *boom*.

“LIKE HELL THAT’S GONNA WORK!!!”

She heard Terra shouting her name. But his voice was drowned out by the explosion of fire and death heading her way. Without thinking, or even trying to dodge, she yanked the Scissor Blade out of her pocket. In the same motion, she flicked her wrist, transforming the hardened Life Fiber weapon back to full size. And then, squeezing one more time, forced the sword into Decapitation Mode.

“BECAUSE I AIN’T...”

Threadcutter disappeared in a flash of crimson stars as she focused everything upon the Scissor Blade. With the familiar, almost unnervingly comfortable metal pressing against both of her hands,

Ryuko *slid* her legs apart. She took a deep breath, constantly *glaring* at the approaching fireball. The corners of her lips twisted into a grimacing snarl. And, at the last possible moment, she reared the hardened Life Fiber blade over her shoulder, stomped one foot against the ground for emphasis, and swung downwards.

“... GONNA BACK DOWN!!!”

A massive explosion of heat slammed against her body.

One of her eyes was forced closed by the searing flames. And for a moment, right as the Scissor Blade vanished into the swirling ball of fire, darkness and whatever other crap the damn Heartless created, her mind blanked. The burning heat scorched her skin. Her jacket sizzled, the magically-sewn fabric unable to withstand the heat. Her muscles screamed as the attack slowly pushed her backwards. The putrid smell of burning rubber filled her nose. She grimaced. She winced. The Scissor Blade trembled in her fingers, which began to redden from the immense heat.

She clenched her burning fingers around the Scissor Blade.

And *roared*.

Pressing her sneakers against the muddied floor, she pushed back, transforming her embarrassing retreat into a standstill. Power flushed through her veins. It came from her heart as she took one step forward. And then another. Each burst of moment causing the outer surface of the darkness-tainted fireball, something at least a dozen times her size, to buckle. Tightening her grip, burnt knuckles bleeding white from the pressure, Ryuko snarled as, with one final determined push, she swung the Scissor Blade downwards, refusing to stop until the weapon slammed into the ground.

As the Scissor Blade sliced through the massive fireball, it dissolved into motes of twinkling light and darkness.

Wisps of dying flames caressed her reddened skin.

Yet instead of smirking or feeling any sense of satisfaction, Ryuko's eyes widened.

Because looming overhead, fang-filled jaws wide open and razor-sharp claws outstretched, was the Heartless.

"Ryuko!"

Terra didn't think when the two illusory clones simultaneously vanished.

Dashing across the grotto, uncaring about the puddles of thick mud and rainwater, he sprang into action. The fear of watching the Heartless injure Ryuko or worse dominated his mind and heart. That helplessness... that fear of being unable to do anything... pushed him beyond his limits. In a burst of speed, sprinting across the grotto as nothing more than a blur, Terra reached the Hunter of the Dark. Earthshaker trembled as he effortlessly sliced through one of its front legs, the limb flopping against the ground before dissolving into darkness.

And with power flowing through his veins, kicked the Heartless, sending it flying across the grotto.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Ryuko winced as the rain battered her burnt skin. Sure, the damage was already healing, but after standing that close to the sun, she wasn't about to make any sudden movements, "The damn thing just... huh? What the hell?"

Terra stiffened at her apprehensive tone before slowly following her eyes.

Surrounding his arm was darkness. The same darkness used by the Heartless. It writhed against his skin like flames. It caressed his skin like water. Earthshaker vanished as he staggered backwards, mouth opening and closing in shock. What was happening? Why was he

using darkness? Terra didn't know what to say... what to think... as he stared at the purplish-black flames covering his right arm. The darkness didn't hurt. It didn't burn his skin. But he could feel the power. This power allowed him to save Ryuko. It was the reason why he seriously injured the Heartless.

But this *wasn't* him!"

A strangled grunt hissed between his clenched teeth as he *forced* the darkness away. He expelled it from his heart. Refused to give into its tainted power. Pushing with every fiber of his being, sweat dripped from Terra's face alongside the falling rain as, with a forcible effort, the darkness disappeared, purple tendrils of light briefly encircling his arm before dissipating into nothingness.

"I..."

The trembling of his voice didn't vanish alongside the darkness, "But how?"

"None of this makes any freaking sense!"

Ryuko, without waiting for Terra to come to terms with what happened, punched his shoulder. *Hard*. Enough that he winced, "Darkness sucks! There's no questioning that! But Beatrix says you shouldn't see everything in black and white! If you hadn't used darkness to save my ass, I'd be in a world of pain! So, as far as I care, you didn't do anything wrong!"

"... you're right."

The rain battered Terra's neck as someplace, maybe deep in his heart, he knew Ryuko was right. He would *never* use darkness. Not willingly. Not on his own. But without darkness, he wouldn't have been strong enough... fast enough... to stop the Hunter of the Dark. Without that unbridled power, Ryuko would have died. Or worse. And he would be the only one still fighting the Heartless. He would have

carried that guilt for the rest of his life, forced to remember that fear and horror every waking moment.

And that *nightmare* removed any remaining doubts.

Sweeping his arm outwards, Terra opened his fingers, Earthshaker reappearing in a flash of golden blocks and rings, “Now, since you have enough energy to talk, maybe you can give me a hand taking this thing down once and for all.”

“You’re joking, right!?”

Ryuko didn’t bother mocking Terra’s insult as the Scissor Blade vanished into her jacket. It would be too easy! And besides, she owed the guy for saving her life. Instead, she decided to settle on the next best thing, “I was doing fine without you!”

“If you say so...”

When Threadcutter reappeared in Ryuko’s hand alongside a flash of crimson stars, Terra smirked, raising his own Keyblade. Glaring at the Hunter of the Dark, the Heartless struggling to stand on three legs, darkness oozing like blood from the gaping wound, he slid one foot backwards, [“Now... let’s finish this!”](#)

The Hunter of the Dark opened its fang-filled maw and *screamed*.

As burning spheres of darkness multiplied throughout the grotto, spinning and rotating around the wounded Heartless, he rushed forward. With Ryuko at his side, he dodged the spheres shooting his way. Light streamed from Earthshaker as the Keyblade deflected and parried whatever he couldn’t avoid, sending rippling explosions into the walls and ceiling. He gritted his teeth, skin searing underneath the never-ending explosions. But he didn’t stop. Didn’t slow down. Not even for a moment. He pushed forward, fire and smoke clinging to his clothes as he leapt through the last eruption of darkness, arms crossed in front of his body.

And upon landing back on the ground, several paces in front of Ryuko, Terra swung Earthshaker.

But not at the Heartless.

“Go!”

Ryuko grinned savagely at Terra’s plan, which was much better than her own. She took another two steps, built up momentum, and *leapt* onto his Keyblade, both of her sneakers landing with a dull *thump*.

“Do it!”

Her brow furrowed into a determined glower as Terra spun around once... twice... three times... before pulling one of his arms away from Earthshaker. The change of momentum sending her flying towards the ceiling. For a moment, quicker than it took a single raindrop to pass in front of her eyes, Ryuko crouched against the cavernous roof. One of her knees pressed on the moss-covered stones. Threadcutter shimmered in her grasp, magic swirling around the razor-sharp blade.

And as the raindrop fell below her eyebrows, disappearing into the rest of the thunderstorm, she *pushed* herself towards the ground.

“SHOCK!!!”

Threadcutter sliced through shadowy flesh, releasing a wave of energy that slammed against the antechamber’s walls. The Hunter of the Dark’s remaining knees buckled beneath both physical and magical explosions. The amber light of its eyes momentarily dimmed, giving Ryuko enough of an opening to kick the back of its head.

Right against Terra’s Keyblade.

With both feet planted against the ground, shoulders and arms burning from the strain, Terra swung Earthshaker as Ryuko stomped

against the Heartless's head. Gripping the Keyblade tightly enough that his knuckles bled white, light spilled from his heart as he sliced through the Hunter of the Dark's neck. Severing its head with a single swing.

"Heh..."

Landing in a crouch behind Terra, one hand pressed into the mud and Threadcutter held to the side, Ryuko cracked a smirk. She *earned* it! Sure, the pain in her shoulder, which used to hurt like a bitch, hadn't stopped screaming in her mind. But watching the decapitated Heartless collapse sideways, its headless corpse disintegrating into nothingness, lightened her sour mood, "... piece of cake!"

Something popped in her back. There was an annoying crick in her neck. While Terra was busy catching his breath, she looked around Gizamaluke's Grotto, noticed the darkness quickly vanishing, before sneaking a peak at the massive gash across her jacket. She was freaking lucky the darkness inside the grotto made it really difficult to see anything. Because shimmering inside the wound, growing fainter with every passing second, was an intimately familiar crimson light.

"But we ain't finished!"

Slapping Terra in the shoulder, she pointed towards the exit, "We still gotta help Aqua and Freya!"

"Damn it! You're right!"

Terra snapped his head towards the pouring heavens. The cold rain battered his face as concern, worry and growing fear stained his heart. If he and Ryuko barely managed to take down one of the Heartless, he could only imagine how much trouble Aqua and Freya were having. Grimacing, he reached towards his shoulder, hand hovering above the piece of rust-colored armor, "Let's go! We don't have time to -"

“Now this is very interesting.”

The unexpected voice caught them off guard. And, turning towards the antechamber's entrance, at the soft footsteps growing closer with every second, Terra leapt backwards, Earthshaker at the ready. He didn't know who this was or why they were here, but they weren't about to get surprised a second time, “Who are you!?”

“After dealing with that other Heartless... the Hunter of the Dark... your friends believed your lives were in danger,” the bald old man emerged from the shadows into the grotto, streams of light dancing across his body. With rain battering his white and black coat, trailing down his face until reaching his silver goatee, the stranger slowly walked towards them, his yellow eyes sweeping across the antechamber, “But it appears my assistance wasn't necessary.”

As the old man walked towards them in a friendly, overly nice way, Ryuko slowly lowered Threadcutter. The Keyblade was still clasped in both her hands. She was ready for any further surprises. But for the moment, she relaxed. Straightening her posture, rain dripped down her face as annoyance and apprehension transformed into confusion. And with a grunt, blurted the only question on her mind.

“It's great you helped Aqua and Freya... but how the hell did you find us?”

Terra wracked his brain, trying to remember *where* he'd seen this person, “You know him, Ryuko?”

“Yeah, I know him,” Ryuko propped Threadcutter against her shoulder, “He stopped by Alexandria last week to talk with Beatrix. Or was it two weeks? I don't remember. I was training with Steiner, so I wasn't really paying attention. Anyway, he's Master Xeha... something. Xehaheart?”

“It's Xehanort,” the newly-named master took little offense to Ryuko's honest mistake. She wouldn't be the first to mispronounce or forget his name. And as he came to a halt, stopping several feet away from

them, he smirked, “Not many Keyblade wielders could defeat such a powerful Heartless. Even I, myself, would have modest difficulty subduing such a monstrous creation. Which is why, Terra, I can state, with absolute confidence, Eraqus made the correct decision allowing you and Aqua to undertake the Mark of Mastery.”

Terra hastily bowed, “Thank you, Master Xehanort!”

“You never answered my question.”

As much as she was thankful Xehanort helped Aqua and Freya, not to mention the rest of Burmecia, from the other Heartless, something about his sudden, expected appearance bugged Ryuko, “How did you find us?”

“I was tracking Ardyn Lucis Caelum. Or, perhaps as he’s calling himself these days, Ardyn Izunia.”

Acknowledging Ryuko’s astute observation with a nod, Xehanort turned around, facing the grotto’s entrance. He allowed his response to cling to their minds. He waited with deliberate hesitation for the tension to become nearly unbearable. Taking a purposeful step forward when Terra, perhaps out of misguided confusion, repeated Ryuko’s question, albeit in a slightly more respectable tone, he clasped both hands against the small of his back, “His darkness is unmistakable. A dark, almost infinite shadow cast upon the light. I was halfway across the realm of light when I sensed his darkness.”

“Unfortunately, I was too late to stop him.”

Xehanort slumped forward, shaking his head in frustration, “Ryuko... Terra... if not for your valiant and noble efforts, Burmecia might have experienced a fate far worse than death. For that, you have my deepest gratitude.”

The master-in-training’s brow furrowed, “Master Xehanort, Ardyn Izunia wasn’t trying to destroy Burmecia. All of this... the Heartless...

was a trap. His goal, what he was really after on Burmecia, was Ryuko.”

“Ryuko, you say?”

Briefly mulling the new information, Xehanort delayed his response. If Ardyn Lucis Caelum was seeking revenge against Ryuko, his chaotic actions would become predictable. Turning around with a *stomp*, he constructed a concerned façade as, with emphasis, he clenched his hands, “Terra, if what you say is true, we can use this knowledge to our advantage.”

“Huh?”

Ryuko blinked at the wizened master’s *excitement*, “What are you talking about? You better not be thinking of using me as bait!”

“Not in the slightest.”

The answer slipped off the elder Keyblade master’s tongue. Using the girl as bait to draw out Ardyn Izunia had crossed his mind. But the risks surpassed the rewards. A single mistake and everything he’d worked decades to achieve would be jeopardized. No, rushing forward without thinking wasn’t the correct approach. Not in such a delicate situation. Relaxing his posture, he turned around, already marching towards the antechamber’s entrance, “But we can discuss such matters later. I must inform Eraqus of Ardyn Izunia’s actions this day.”

“You’re hiding something, aren’t you!?”

“Yen Sid told me about your world, Ryuko,” Xehanort purposely lowered his voice as he stopped walking. He folded his arms once more against the small of his back. Gloved knuckles pressing against each other while he stared at the ground, “I will not presume myself capable of understanding what you experienced. However, when you feel you’re ready, I may have information which could prove helpful in tracking down the source of your frustrations.”

For a long, imperceptibly silent moment, Ryuko stared at the old man's back.

Suspicious about Xehanort's motivations raced through her mind. And, as she fell into line alongside Terra, clenched her free hand into a fist. She wasn't born freaking yesterday! This offer was too good to be true. He just happened to know something about the masked bastard when Yen Sid and Beatrix were in the dark about everything? Even if his job was searching every freaking world for the psychopath, she could *tell* he was hiding something. And yet, despite that being the likely answer, she couldn't pass up this opportunity. Xehanort sounded dubious in a way that made her skin crawl.

But if he was telling the truth... if what he said brought her face-to-face with the masked freak... she had nothing to lose by listening to him.

Chapter 5.1

Here is the beginning of Chapter 5. Now, just to clear a few things, this opening takes place a few days before Terra and Aqua's Mark of Mastery.

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 5 - The Pretender

"Is there something on your mind, Mickey?"

At the question, more of a gentle suggestion than command, Mickey paused. His attention drifted, if only for a moment. His mouth opened before closing. But with some reluctance, he went back to reading. The massive book taking up most of the table. And Yen Sid, his bushy brows furrowing just enough to convey a sense of worry, flicked his finger. At some unseen order, magic swirling through the bonds connecting everything, the book snapped shut with a dull *thump*.

Earning, at long last, some semblance of a reaction from his apprentice.

"Huh?"

Mickey blinked when the book snapped shut around his fingers. But then he remembered Yen Sid's question, what his master *really* wanted to know, and looked away, "I've just... had a lot of time to think about things."

"Hmm..."

It was an admission he'd expected for quite some time. Mickey could achieve remarkable feats when given the opportunity. While his apprentice's habits left much to be desired, there was no mistaking the strong light dwelling within his heart. A sense of justice and

compassion which gave Mickey the imperative to help others. Yet some things were simply impossible to ignore. Stroking his beard, Yen Sid slightly narrowed his eyes before nodding, "You're referring to your confrontation with Ardyn Lucis Caelum?"

"The guy almost killed Ryuko."

Guilt and self-loathing, finally brought to the surface by his master's intervention, made it difficult for Mickey to speak, "And I... I tried *everything*... used everything you taught me... but the same thing would have happened to me if Gilgamesh hadn't shown up."

To confess the chaos and commotion dancing through his heart. Yen Sid might have saved them before Ardyn Lucis Caelum made good on his promise. And sure, none of them escaped with anything more than a few cuts and bruises. And more than their fair share of bad memories. But that was beside the point. His hands trembled, not from fear but anger. He'd been through a lot over the years. Adventuring with Donald and Goofy. Getting into a few scraps with Pete over the most trivial things. But the Festival of Champions had been the first time he'd nearly died.

When he and Ryuko stopped Ardyn from killing Gilgamesh, he'd confidently thought they couldn't lose. That the guy was nothing more than another villain. Someone they - he, Ryuko and Gilgamesh - could defeat by working together.

And *that* was the problem.

That stubbornness almost cost Ryuko her life. Sure, they stopped Ardyn Lucis Caelum from killed Regent Cid. But if he'd taken time to think of a better strategy instead of attempting to stop Ardyn from escaping, maybe he wouldn't have fallen for such an obvious trap. And that was his own fault. Pearl was a powerful spell. An explosion of light. But it took way too long to channel that much magic. And when fighting someone like Ardyn, every second was important. If he tried something else... something more efficient... instead of throwing away caution to the win... he wouldn't have needed

Gilgamesh's help. They could have attacked Ardyn together instead of wasting valuable time.

"If I'd been more patient," Mickey sagged in the chair, guilt weighing heavily on his heart, "Maybe things would have been different."

"You mustn't blame yourself."

As Yen Sid spoke, a harsh silence enveloped the study, "None of you - Ryuko and Gilgamesh included - could have withstood Ardyn Lucis Caelum's full and terrible power."

"Yeah... but... there's something else."

Deep inside his heart, Mickey knew Yen Sid was correct. He was strong. Perhaps one of the stronger people in the realm of light. But even if he had come up with a perfect plan, worked alongside Ryuko and Gilgamesh, Ardyn Lucis Caelum was simply too powerful. The guy was a monster. Someone who threw away everything to embrace darkness. Right before Yen Sid appeared, as they were prepared to fight until the end, Ardyn had released some of the darkness dwelling in his heart. A tidal wave of shadows that covered Lindblum, extinguishing all but the brightest light.

"He threatened Ryuko," folding his hands together, the normally cheerful king looked aside in shame, "Maybe he didn't threaten me or Gilgamesh, but if he went after Minnie or Goofy or Donald or anyone else, just to get at *me*, I don't know what I'd do."

"I see... you're worried about your friends."

The erstwhile Keyblade master furrowed his bushy eyebrows. There was the source of Mickey's worries. Why his pupil's heart had been clouded by guilt these last few weeks. Leaning his head forward, Yen Sid hummed in the back of his throat, "As you already know, my colleagues are scouring the worlds for Ardyn Lucis Caelum. Or, as he calls himself these days, Ardyn Izunia. Through information found in Lindblum's Royal Archives, we're prepared to once more seal him

away. Yet, through means unknown to not only myself, but my former master, his location eludes us.”

“So...”

Mickey looked straight into his master’s eyes, “... nobody’s seen him since Lindblum? He could be anywhere, and we wouldn’t know?”

“One of my colleagues, a man by the name of Xehanort, has gathered important information regarding Ardyn Lucis Caelum’s movements.”

A modicum of worry whispered in the depths of Yen Sid’s mind. Concern squashed beneath the mantle of cautiousness. What transpired between Xehanort and Eraqus many years ago echoed to the present. An event that should, under normal circumstances, had led to repercussions. And one that almost did. For upon hearing of the incident, he’d prepared to investigate his colleague’s dark ambitions. To determine how far Xehanort has been pulled astray by his own heart. But despite the tragedy which unfolded that fateful afternoon, Xehanort hadn’t committed any further punishable actions.

At least, nothing necessitating further observation.

“His comprehensive knowledge of darkness, while suspicious and against my personal reservations, is crucial if we wish to bring this matter to a swift conclusion.”

The sorcerer steeped his fingers at Mickey’s silent understanding. Leaning backwards, he closed his eyes as his mind shifted to another, more worrisome topic than Xehanort’s previous misdeeds, “On the other hand, this masked boy... the youth bearing a Keyblade... remains elusive. He possesses a connection with the Unversed, creatures spawned from darkness and born through negativity. He released Ardyn Lucis Caelum from his eternal imprisonment. And most tragically...”

His voice hardened with every word, "... this youth destroyed Ryuko's world. Through his actions, she lost her loved ones, friends and family alike, to darkness."

Mickey didn't know what to say.

He tried... and failed... to wrap his mind around what Ryuko experienced. But he was still at a loss for words. Unable to imagine something so horrendous. To lose everyone she loved to darkness was incomprehensible. If something like that happened to Minnie and the others, if someone purposely destroyed his world, he didn't know what he would do. He would be angry, sure. Focused on making that person paid. But in the end, no matter how much he tried, he would never understand what Ryuko lost. And that, more than anything, made it nearly impossible to comfort Ryuko. What could he say? Apologizing wouldn't bring her loved ones back. It would change the fact her world was dragged into darkness by someone bearing the Keyblade.

"I know..."

Resolve flickered in the depths of Mickey's heart as he leapt onto his feet, "Which is why I have to get stronger! Because if I do that... if I stop slacking off... I can help Ryuko find this person and stop him from hurting anyone else!"

"I couldn't agree more."

The magical skies filtering through the shaped windows cast a purplish light across the study as Yen Sid raised his hands. Almost immediately, smoke and light glittered in swirling and spiraling vortexes above the wooden desk. His arms rotated clockwise and counterclockwise, moving back and forth. And in a flash of purest blue, bushy eyebrows furrowed in minute concentration, another book materialized into existence. One in nearly pristine condition, lacking any noticeable lettering apart from a single word emblazoned upon the spine.

“Although, if you desire learning more detailed instructions on temporal magic, might I suggest Ultimecia’s Tome.”

With a *swish* of his fingers, the forbidden book exchanged places with the one on Mickey’s desk, “It should contain what you’re seeking.”

Mickey stared at the purple book, the binding immaculate and pages colored only a little yellow, before nodding enthusiastically.

“Gosh! Thank you, Master Yen Sid! I won’t let you down!”

Yen Sid waited until Mickey dashed out of his study, intent on understanding the information contained within Ultimecia’s greatest work, before closing his eyes.

The burden of responsibility weighed heavily on his heart. It seemed like only yesterday that the peace and tranquility he’d spent decades maintaining throughout the realm of light was secured. And yet, over the last few weeks, everything changed. The destruction of Ryuko’s world. A masked youth connected to the Unversed spreading across the worlds and bearing a Keyblade. Ardyn Lucis Caelum escaping imprisonment. It was only a small solace that Ryuko was under Beatrix’s protection. For if Ardyn Izunia sought revenge against her, Beatrix and Steiner were more than capable of holding him at bay until assistance arrived.

But that said nothing about the denizens of Alexandria.

His thoughts turned upon themselves. They grew darker, more foreboding as several stars, twinkling through the moon-shaped window, flickered in the heavens.

“I cannot shake the feeling something truly terrible is about to transpire.”

Chapter 5.2

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/c/c1/Ryuko_in_Suit.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20131011010910]

“In troubled times, one must always be prepared for unforeseen developments.”

Standing before the three empty thrones, a testament to an earlier time, flanked on either side by his fellow Keyblade Masters, Eraqus gazed upon his eldest pupils. The powerful words of encouragement reverberated throughout the great hall, darkened by the late hour. Despite the terrible battle which transpired in Burmecia, one that miraculously resulted in minimal casualties thanks to Xehanort’s last-minute intervention, neither Terra nor Aqua were injured. Only Ryuko, standing next to Ventus to his right, bore anything resembling wounds. But that was little more than insignificant damage to her clothing.

It would appear Ryuko learned much from Beatrix.

“You were told to investigate the connection between the Unversed and the masked individual bearing the Keyblade. A straightforward assignment,” his voice deepened, turning almost gravelly, “And yet, neither of you hesitated confronting Ardyn Lucis Caelum within the hallowed sanctuary of Gizamaluke’s Grotto.”

Both of his students snapped to attention, their hearts swelling with pride. But he didn’t allow such emotions cloud his judgement. Turning his attention towards the other participant in the battle, he nodded at Ryuko, eliciting confusion from the teenager, “Ryuko, the strength of your heart is commendable. Your decision to tackle the Heartless individually undoubtedly saved countless lives. But had I

known Ardyn Lucis Caelum sought revenge, I never would have allowed your participation.”

“Uh... thank you...”

Ryuko stiffly bowed, “It wasn’t a big deal.”

“Now then... Aqua. Terra.”

Eraqus allowed himself a moment’s pause. In the split-second between consecutive thoughts, he gazed introspectively into his heart. And with a steady tone bearing no trace of his inner conflict, raised his arm, “Both of you performed commendably. Your actions saved countless innocent lives from Ardyn Lucis Caelum’s terrible retribution. However, after deliberating with Beatrix and Xehanort, I’ve determined only Aqua successfully demonstrated the Mark of Mastery.”

An agonizing silence enveloped the great hall.

Terra stared in disbelief.

A strangled gasp passed through Aqua’s lips.

But it was Ryuko who shouted the question on everyone’s mind, “Say what!?”

Standing before the empty throne closest to Ryuko and Ventus, Beatrix’s mood soured as she glanced aside, her single purplish-red eye narrowed. For the first time in months, or perhaps even years, something resembling frustration danced in the furthest depths of her heart, “Eraqus...”

“Terra, you failed to keep the darkness within your heart sufficiently in check.”

It was painful speaking the truth. Particularly about his eldest pupil. But Eraqus closed his eyes, silencing the troubling whispers beating against the darkest corners of his mind. Beatrix had already voiced

her concerns about Terra. At length and in great detail. But the Mark of Mastery was sacrosanct. While he was immensely grateful for her wisdom, whether Aqua or Terra succeeded or failed was his decision. And his alone. Nothing could change that, "Your actions endangered not only yourself, but Ryuko. And for that, I've deemed you unworthy of the Mark."

"Eraqus, I must protest your excessive haste."

Xehanort allowed his aged features to crease. His reaction towards the expected announcement was one of purposeful disdain. Ensuring his thoughts on the unfair matter were publicly known, "While he wielded darkness against that forsaken creature, it was an accident. A lapse in judgment from his concern for Ryuko's safety."

With a sharp pivot, bringing himself face-to-face with Eraqus, regret shimmered in his amber eyes as he winced, "Don't allow my past mistakes cloud your judgment. Terra unleashed his darkness not for power or knowledge. He allowed darkness into his heart to prevent Ryuko from suffering an unthinkable fate at the hands of that Heartless. And after he successfully saved her life, they destroyed the Hunter of the Dark. Once more interfering with Ardyn Izunia's terrible plans!"

His gloves crinkled as he clenched both hands, "Surely preventing Burmecia from succumbing to darkness outweighs an otherwise minor loss of control?"

"As bearers of the Keyblade, we must hold ourselves to higher standards."

Eraqus spoke with renewed determination. The scar cutting down the right side of his face burned, but not from phantom reminders of half-forgotten memories, "That Terra unleashed the darkness inside his heart, accidentally or otherwise, goes against everything I've taught him. Nothing... no excuse nor reason... can excuse such reckless misbehavior."

“The hell does that mean!?”

Spittle flew between Ryuko’s clenched teeth. Keyblade Master or not, the bastard didn’t know what the hell he was talking about! But one look from Beatrix, a threatening but familiar glare promising *something*, stopped her from confronting Eraqus. However, she refused to stand back and shut up, “Terra used darkness was to save me! If he wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t be here!”

“Hold your tongue!”

Tranquil fury simmered within the stalwart guardian’s heart, “You are here as a matter of courtesy! Do not test my patience!”

Eraqus refused to condone such insolence. If he hadn’t known Beatrix for years, worked alongside her occasionally, he would have presumed Ryuko’s insubordination originated from a familiar source. For Aqua or Terra, that would have been enough. Yet Ryuko’s frustration, justified or not, hadn’t abated. On the contrary, lashing out with the full weight of his station only hardened her resolve. And that, if only briefly, brought to mind his most recent conversation with Yen Sid pertaining to Lindblum. How Ryuko, through means unfamiliar not only to himself, but the former Keyblade Master, resisted Ardyn Izunia’s terrible darkness.

“As for you Terra, understand this wasn’t an easy decision to make.”

The creases of his mouth tightened at his eldest pupil’s guilt, “Study your mistakes. Understand why you felt necessary to wield darkness. And prepare yourself for next time.”

“I...”

Terra winced as he struggled to find the right words, “... yes, Master.”

“One more thing.”

Descending from the throne, each step carefully measured, Eraqus clasped his hands against the small of his back. The simmering tension, once nearly at the boiling point due to Ryuko's insolence, cooled. Aware of Beatrix's continued disapproval, an argument she wouldn't dare announce now that his decision was finalized, he cleared his thoughts, "Aqua, as our newest Master, you are now privy to certain knowledge regarding your newfound station. Please come to my study for further instruction."

He said nothing more before departing. His footsteps echoed softly, carrying a heavy weight matching the burden of guilt upon his shoulders, as he descended the stairs. Sorrow stabbed at his heart. It danced upon his eyes, emotions otherwise concealed by the encompassing darkness and shadows. An expression witnessed by nobody. Not even Xehanort, who followed suit but a few moments later.

And still standing at attention, blue eyes slightly quivering, Aqua didn't know what to say.

The newly-promoted Keyblade Master struggled finding the right words. But in the end, no matter how much she tried, all she managed was keeping her voice steady as she placed her hand on Terra's shoulder, "Hey... I'm sorry."

"I don't understand."

Terra stared at his right hand. Daring *something* to manifest. But nothing happening. He could feel *nothing* but his own weakness, "The darkness... where did it come from?"

"Tch! That guy doesn't know what the hell he's talking about!"

As she stomped her way towards Aqua and Terra, one eyebrow angrily twitching and the corners of her mouth twisting into a grimace, Ryuko ignored Ven's bewilderment, "Reckless misbehavior, my ass!"

Her sneakers squeaked as she glared across the great hall. Even with the thick darkness coming through the stained-glass window, there was enough moonlight to see the smug bastard's stupid haircut, "You should be Master! You damn well earned it! And he's just gonna take that away because of a little mistake!?"

"Master Eraqus said 'next time,' right?"

Ven had trouble understanding why Terra failed the exam. Sure, maybe he accidentally used darkness. But that couldn't be the only reason Master Eraqus failed him. Could it? And he certainly didn't expect anyone handpicked by Master Beatrix to speak out of turn. But even if Ryuko was rude, she had a point. Terra might have mistakenly used darkness, but it wasn't for anything bad. Or for power. He did it to save Ryuko's life. To protect Burmecia from that villain. If not for Terra helping Ryuko, who knows how bad things could have been. The entire world... *another* world... could have succumbed to darkness.

Attempting to crack a smile, he motioned with his hands, "That means you'll have another chance at passing the exam!"

"Maybe..."

Even as the answer - no, the question - spilled from his heart, Terra didn't believe it. He felt numb. Like he was swimming in molasses. At any moment, he expected to wake up in his bed. But this wasn't a dream. And it wasn't a nightmare. Guilt at his pathetic weakness flushed through his heart. And to steady his nerves, he bit the inside of his cheek until the bitter taste of copper touched his tongue, "But now did Master Eraqus know about my darkness? I didn't say anything about it. I mean, he didn't ask any questions."

A dark thought whispered into his ear as he looked at Ryuko, "Did you tell him?"

"Not a chance!"

It might have sounded angry. And sure, there was more than enough frustration to confuse a lot of people. But Ryuko didn't blame Terra. Hell, he had a point. She was the only person who saw everything. If things had been the other way around, if she used darkness to save him from that goddamn Heartless and Beatrix failed her, she'd suspect he told someone what happened. But that *wasn't* the truth, "When it comes to darkness, Beatrix says intentions matter more than anything! The stuff messes with your heart. It turns you into something you're not! But using it by accident isn't that big of a deal! No matter what that guy said!"

She snorted under her breath, "And even if he asked, I would have forgotten that little detail."

Terra felt relieved knowing Ryuko didn't tell anyone. But at the same time, nothing made sense. He and Ryuko had been the only people in Gizamaluke's Grotto after Aqua and Freya hunted down the other Heartless, "If you didn't tell Master Eraqus, who did?"

Aqua frowned as something came to mind, "Wasn't Master Xehanort there?"

"Yeah... he was..."

The question was like a slap to the face. And Ryuko stiffened, feeling like a complete moron. Aqua was absolutely right! Now that she thought about it, Xehanort arrived just after she and Terra defeated the Heartless. At the time, she hadn't thought too much about it. Sure, the guy was suspicious. And really melodramatic. But he saved Aqua and Freya from the other Heartless. He knew something about the masked bastard. And she had been too exhausted and worried to give a shit. But now his unnerving answers... his perfect timing... made freaking sense! He'd been waiting outside the whole time! He watched them fight the Heartless!

He saw Terra use darkness!

Ryuko's eyebrow twitched as her head snapped in the direction she last saw the Keyblade Master, "And I think he owes Terra an -"

["You stepped out of line, Ryuko."](#)

Beatrix took one step... and then another... as she addressed her student with modest discontent, "I taught you better than that."

The complaint sunk deep into Ryuko's heart. But just because Beatrix was smarter, that didn't mean she was *right*, "Yeah... you did. But Terra failing because of a stupid mistake isn't fair! And you know it!"

"It's not my place to judge Eraqus's decision."

Beatrix swept a hand through her chestnut brown hair. No matter what Ryuko believed, and despite her personal thoughts on the matter, Eraqus was the only person capable of granting Terra the rank of Master. But she would never dare voice her opinion. Not after Eraqus already made his decision. The Mark of Mastery was sacrosanct. As much as Ryuko vehemently disagreed with hundreds of years of tradition, Terra wasn't the first student to unsuccessfully obtain the Mark because of darkness lurking within their hearts. And he certainly wouldn't be the last.

"The Hunter of the Dark is a particularly powerful and dangerous Heartless."

Allowing the trivial matter of her student's insubordination to pass into the annals of history, she addressed Terra without changing her tone, "Don't allow this minor setback take away that accomplishment."

Terra wilted under the praise, "But Master Eraqus was right. I lost control over my darkness."

"Darkness feeds upon negative emotions. It causes one to lose sight of themselves. Why they sought that power in the first place," the

Keyblade Master tapped her finger against Terra's chest, "And, given time, it swallows their heart."

"But, as Ryuko already told you, intentions are important."

She drew backwards, stepping away from the teenager, "Eraqus might disagree, but there lays a difference, however significant, between purposely using the darkness dwelling inside one's heart... and accidentally using that power to save your friends."

"I... thank you, Master Beatrix," Terra straightened his posture at the encouraging words, "I'll work hard to make things right."

The determination behind those words encouraged Beatrix. She didn't doubt Terra would keep his promise. As the corners of her mouth quirked into an unnerving smile, drawing their undivided attention, the Keyblade Master turned towards Ryuko, "As for you, Ryuko, I believe this is where our paths diverge."

"You're expelling Ryuko?"

Ven gasped in the back of his throat, unable to keep his thoughts to himself, "Just for speaking out of turn!?"

"On the contrary, there's little more I can teach her."

The Keyblade Master basked in the subsequent confusion. Ryuko's stubbornness might be matched only by her rebellious behavior, which hadn't diminished since meeting the teenager upon Yen Sid's request, but she was a gifted student, "In less than a month, she's learned what normally takes even the best swordsman years to master. She took my teachings, abilities and secrets... and made them her own. If it were my decision, Burmecia would have sufficed as her Mark of Mastery."

Her smile imperceptibly softened as embarrassment and frustration cycled through Ryuko's heart, "But, of course, that would ignore

centuries of tradition. For that reason, her upcoming journey will function as an adequate replacement.”

“You can say whatever you want! But I ain’t gonna be Master until Eraqus changes his mind!”

As a hushed silence pressed against her ears, Ryuko ignored the awkward tension. Sure, she heard Aqua’s surprised gasp. And yeah, Ven was shocked by her announcement. But they shouldn’t have expected anything less! Snorting out the side of her mouth, more annoyed then pissed when Beatrix’s grin widened, she jabbed her thumb against her chest, “Or he gives Terra another chance!”

“Ryuko, it’s fine.”

Terra attempted to smile, “You don’t need to worry about me.”

“Like hell I don’t!”

With that said, Ryuko stomped any further complaints into the ground. She *smashed* Terra’s stupid excuses underneath her sneaker. If Beatrix thought she was Keyblade Master material despite telling everyone in Alexandria she wasn’t interested, the job must really suck. She gagged at the responsibility. But as she began explaining *why* Terra was acting like a complete moron, a shadowed figure out of the corner of her eye, disappearing down the stairs, snapped her back to reality.

“Besides, there’s something important I gotta do,” her voice lowered an octave, but not quite enough to become a whisper, “And worrying about responsibilities and other stuff’s gonna mess things up.”

Despite giving what could only be called a heartfelt apology, Terra didn’t say anything. The corner of her mouth twitched. Her sneakers *squeaked* as she pivoted away from Beatrix and glared at him, “So, you better prove Eraqus wrong! Because if you ain’t Master by the time I’m finished, you’re gonna need to worry about me kicking your ass! Got it!?”

“Fine... fine...”

He raised his hands, faux surrendering at the threatening promise, “I’ll figure things out and become Master before you know it.”

Aqua couldn’t help but laugh. She covered her mouth, grinning broadly while Terra tried - and pretty much failed - convincing Ven he wasn’t giving up. That he didn’t need Ryuko’s threat to prove Master Eraqus was wrong. The tension somewhat, if temporarily, dissipated, bringing things back to a semblance of normalcy. But standing next to the newly promoted Master, watching the exchange through unfocused eyes, Ryuko reached towards the sleek armor covering most of her left forearm.

Her fingers gently grazed the dark blue segmented armor stretching from hand to elbow, one intention away from transforming into a set of badass armor. Thanks to Beatrix remembering she forgot her Keyblade Armor behind to catch the transport to Lindblum... then nearly missing the connection to Burmecia... by the skin of her teeth, there was nothing standing in her way. No more training or waiting for permission. She could hunt down the masked psychopath on her own terms. And, much more important than transforming the bastard’s face into a bloody smear on her fist, finally start looking for Satsuki, Mako and everyone else.

Yet she felt like total shit on the inside.

Maybe it didn’t look anything like him. And the colors were completely different. And it wasn’t exactly clothing. But the armor reminded her of Senketsu. It brought back memories of everything they did together. Things she hadn’t thought about for a long time. Them kicking all kinds of smug ass... eating Mako’s mom’s delicious mystery croquettes... handwashing blood and dirt out of his fabric.

And his final words.

But no matter how much she felt like crap, even if this was betraying Senketsu’s memory, without the armor, she couldn’t find Satsuki,

Mako and the others. She couldn't protect them from the masked bastard.

[She needed to know they were safe.](#)

"It has been a pleasure teaching you, Ryuko."

Tossing back her hair one final time, Beatrix marched past her student with a mixture of satisfaction and pride, ignorant of the turbulent storm plaguing Ryuko's heart, "May your heart be your guiding key."

Ryuko didn't say anything as Beatrix disappeared down the stairs, chestnut brown hair the last thing she saw of her Master. There was a strange taste bubbling in her stomach. But she quickly suppressed that nauseous feeling. She pushed it to the furthest corners of her mind. And then stomped it out of existence. This wasn't the time to feel sorry for herself. Not when there was so much to do. Rubbing her hand against the side of her face, she took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and promptly groaned.

"Thanks for everything... I really mean it."

Curling all but two fingers into a mock salute, she waved over her shoulder before marching towards the other staircase, "But there's something I gotta do."

As she watched Ryuko break into a sprint while offering a friendly goodbye, silence pressed against Aqua's heart. Holding her hand over her chest, the new Keyblade Master struggled to find the right words, blue eyes quivering at the confusion still clinging to her friend, "Terra, I -"

"Thanks, Aqua," Terra interrupted while walking in the opposite direction of Ryuko, "But I need to clear my head."

Aqua tried speaking, but nothing came out.

Her fingers trembled against her heart when Ven followed Terra, leaving her completely alone. But with a wince, she clenched them into a fist, fingernails digging into her palm. Terra was her oldest friend. He trusted her more than anyone. She knew his deepest secrets. So, why didn't she support him? The question pained her heart. Instead of Ryuko, she should have spoken against Master Eraqus. She should have refused becoming Master until Terra passed the Mark of Mastery. She should have told Master Eraqus that either they both passed... or they both failed.

But she *hadn't*.

"... Terra..."

Chapter 5.3

*Ryuko is somewhat hard to manipulate. Maybe it's because she spent months dealing with Satsuki's plans. But in nine out of ten times, attempting to trick her into doing something is bound to backfire. She might still DO it... but don't bother questioning if, along the way, she takes you down as well. Because Ryuko *really* doesn't like people messing with her. Even if the person was *right* to trick her, odds are, more or less, she'll still take her frustrations out on them.*

[img:

[https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/9/97/Mountain_Path_KHBBS.png/800px-Mountain_Path_KHBBS.png\]](https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/9/97/Mountain_Path_KHBBS.png/800px-Mountain_Path_KHBBS.png)

“Where the hell did he go?”

She took the steps two... three... at a time before jumping the rest of the way.

The courtyard was completely empty. But as she glanced around, one corner of her mouth twisted into a snarl, Ryuko *knew* Xehanort was around. She'd seen the guy through the castle window. The moon was high in the sky, hovering above the mountains, letting her see almost everything in the world. There was no way he could have disappeared.

But there was nothing but the insects buzzing against her ears.

[“I suppose you have questions, Ryuko.”](#)

She wasn't startled by the Keyblade Master appearing out of nowhere. Not when there were more important things to worry about. Snorting in the back of her throat at the guy's attempt at being mysterious and enigmatic, Ryuko turned around, anger-filled eyes watching Xehanort descend the stairs. She waited until he reached

the courtyard, standing only a few meters away, before expressing what was on her mind, “You watched me and Terra fight that Heartless, didn’t you!?”

“I wished to observe your strength,” Xehanort slowly answered, unperturbed by her frustration, “You can say I was curious how you would deal with such a terrible monster. With the other Hunter of the Dark destroyed and Ardyn Izunia escaping into the darkness, Burmecia was no longer threatened. But had either of your lives been jeopardized, or the Heartless was too powerful, I would have quickly intervened.”

“However, Terra reacted faster than anticipated.”

A single firefly danced around Xehanort as he sighed, regret and guilt clinging to the surrounding darkness. His posture, once firm yet arthritic, became slouched. He clasped both hands behind his back. And with some reluctance, hesitantly continued, “If I had reacted but a moment sooner, Terra wouldn’t have unleashed the darkness within his heart out of concern for your safety.”

With every word, his gravelly voice deepened into a harsh whisper, “And to think, I assumed Eraqus would be more open-minded. I’m such a fool.”

“Yeah, you kinda are!”

It took serious effort, but she refrained herself from saying everything on her mind, “For someone who knew the guy, you *really* were stupid.”

“Hmm... that I was...”

Xehanort allowed a trace of a smile at the teenager’s unfiltered response. As the moon hung overhead, silhouetted above the darkened mountains surrounding the castle, casting an eerie white pallor over the world, he turned around with a remorseful chuckle, “I believe there’s nothing inherently wrong with darkness. Darkness

and light are fundamental concepts, equal and opposite. Light casts the shadow which spawns darkness... and darkness cannot exist without light to create it. A similar philosophy to your Master's. However, Eraqus views things in a rather different light. He believes darkness should be *destroyed*! A venomous hatred that is, I'm afraid, partially my doing."

The corner of her mouth twitched, "What'd you do? Stab him in the back or something?"

"My ambitions blinded my heart..."

His answer emerged alongside a weary sigh, "... they prevented me from seeing the truth until it was nearly too late."

As crickets chirped in the surrounding forests, creeks and rivers bubbling somewhere inside the darkness, Ryuko glared at Xehanort.

That was one hell of a sob story. And sure, it explained why Eraqus acted like an asshole. But sad or not, it had nothing to do with her. If the guy wanted to blame Terra for something that wasn't his fault, there wasn't anything she could do to change his mind. Not without kicking his ass. And that was gonna be impossible unless she got stronger. And yet, there was something else. A weird thought whispering in her heart. Maybe she was just being suspicious for no good reason, but for some weird reason, Xehanort sounded like he was preaching.

Like he was saying what she wanted to hear.

Snarling at the thought of being screwed with, she scoffed again, "That's sad and all, but you could have just kept your big mouth shut!"

"You're right."

Xehanort turned around, interest gleaming in his amber eyes, "But my foolishness isn't why you're here, is it, Ryuko?"

“Gee, aren’t you observant?”

She didn’t *mean* to sound snarky. Maybe the guy really did know something about the masked bastard. But months of dealing with crap, not just in the Realm of Light, but at Honnouji Academy, gave her, as Beatrix said, perspective. Xehanort sounded creepy. He sounded like Mikisugi when the flamboyant exhibitionist was keeping secrets about her dad. So, until he proved himself, she was gonna keep the old guy at arm’s length, “Tell me everything you know about that psychopath!”

“The boy you seek...”

There was a pregnant pause as Xehanort gathered his thoughts, “... his name is Vanitas. My former apprentice.”

His confession hit Ryuko like a Junketsu-powered punch to the face.

“All this secrecy... waiting until nobody’s around...”

As everything Xehanort admitted sunk into her heart, Ryuko found her vision growing red. Hatred flushed through her body, stretching from her fingers to toes. Her knuckles bled white from resisting the overwhelming desire to summon Threadcutter or the Scissor Blade. And with her jaw clenched to the point her teeth ground together, she all but *spat*, “... is because you don’t want anyone knowing the masked freak’s your fucking screw up!”

She grabbed the Keyblade Master. Her fingers wrapped themselves inside his coat before, with a hateful snarl, she slammed the bastard against the wall right next to the stairs, covering the courtyard in the blink of an eye.

“Satsuki... Mako... everyone... they’re all gone because of YOU!!!!”

Ryuko tightened her grip on Xehanort’s stupid and weird coat. She wanted to break his nose into a million pieces. She *needed* to make him feel a fraction of the agony constantly pulling at her heart. But

that wouldn't solve anything. It wouldn't help find Satsuki and Mako. Or bring her any closer to taking down Vanitas. All it would do, even if the punch made her feel better, was leave her back at square one.

"So, start at the beginning!"

With some reluctance, she released Xehanort. And after getting her anger and frustration under control, forced herself to calm down, "And don't leave anything out!"

"Vanitas was my apprentice."

If having himself slammed against solid rock hard enough to leave a small crack bothered the Keyblade Master, he didn't show any pain. Or was *a lot* stronger than she thought. Glaring at the old man, her mouth twisted into a snarl when he slumped forward, "He was headstrong, rather stubborn and phenomenally gifted. Yet darkness lurked inside his heart."

An exhausted and weary sigh passed between the wizened master's lips as he locked eyes with Ryuko, all but pleading his failure, "I attempted to persuade Vanitas from his destructive path. But he ignored my stern warnings. He believed darkness must be embraced, not merely accepted. And beyond my back, he began utilizing his newfound dark powers. By the time I realized something was wrong, it was already too late to save him."

He slouched forward, no longer capable of bearing the weight of Ryuko's suspicions, "My apprentice was gone... and only Vanitas remained."

Ryuko's anger cooled to a boiling simmer, "I find it REALLY hard to believe you didn't see that coming."

"Until it was too late, I believed Vanitas was the same wide-eyed, eager young boy," Xehanort slowly lumbered towards the waist-high stone wall surrounding the courtyard. And dew-covered grass crunched beneath his boots as he stopped, amber eyes staring into

the misty valley encircling the floating castle, “But, perhaps, I was blinded by my heart. Vanitas always seemed... distant. As if something painful... some terrible memory or experience... stained his heart with darkness.”

“Alright, so Vanitas snapped and went batcrap crazy.”

She dragged her tongue against the inside of her mouth. And, a moment later, her eyebrow twitched. Did Xehanort think she'd fall for something so obviously stupid? The old man was powerful. There was no questioning that. He was a freaking Keyblade Master. He destroyed the other Hunter of the Dark without breaking a sweat. Something she and Terra struggled killing together. Even Vanitas, or whatever the crap the bastard's name really was, wasn't that strong. And this guy had trouble taking down his psychopathic student?

Audible disgust clung to her throat, “Why the hell is he still alive!?”

“Striking down someone you consider your son isn't... easy.”

The soft orange light from fireflies illuminated the aged contours of Xehanort's face, “I... hesitated... at the last moment. Underneath the darkness and insanity twisting Vanitas into an abomination, I remembered his happiness upon summoning the Keyblade. And the creature used that opportunity to escape. For years, Vanitas remained one step ahead of me. Mocking my failure as his Master.”

“Until a few months ago, that is.”

He folded his hands against the small of his back. The unstated meaning of his confession clung to Ryuko's heart. But he continued without pause, not allowing the teenager to express her concerns, “Releasing Ardyn Izunia upon the Realm of Light. Creating the Unversed. Dragging your world into darkness. The destruction and chaos caused by Vanitas rests entirely upon my shoulders.”

Xehanort grimaced from phantom pain, “Unfortunately, Ardyn Izunia remains the most pressing matter. And yet, Vanitas remains my

responsibility.”

With desperation, he turned around, “Lend me your strength, Ryuko! Right this wrong that I have wrought!”

“Tch! I don’t need your permission to kick his ass!”

Ryuko spat out the words, but she refrained from saying anything else. If Vanitas was really like his son, killing him would have been really difficult. She would feel the same if Mako had gone insane. But feeling sorry for the guy didn’t change what happened to *her* world. The masked psychopath destroyed everything. And Xehanort’s apology wasn’t going to restore everything she lost, “Just tell me where to find him!”

“That, I’m afraid, eludes me.”

Her cheek twitched as she *hissed*, “You haven’t given me anything more than his freaking name! So, unless you have something useful, we’re through talking!”

“Vanitas always took pride in his accomplishments.”

As the moon loomed ominously in the midnight darkness, Xehanort remained silent, almost introspective. He allowed the deeper meaning of his words to seep into Ryuko’s heart. And while she stopped mid-step, cautious optimism replacing frustration, he raised his hand, fingers clenched into a fist, “Your selfless actions interfered with his terrible plans not once, but twice. First when you survived the tragic events surrounding your world. And second, when you prevented Ardyn Izunia from dragging Lindblum into darkness.”

The Keyblade Master frowned deeply before looking over his shoulder, “Until recently, Beatrix has deterred Vanitas. Even with the power of darkness, he’s incapable of facing one of the strongest master’s I’ve had the fortune of knowing. But now that you’re free to explore the Realm of Light at your leisure, I’m certain my wayward apprentice will seek vengeance at the first opportunity.”

“He’s gonna come for me, huh?”

Ryuko found herself grinning. And then, just as quickly, gasped, terror stabbing at her heart. Damn it! This wasn’t good news! Vanitas was insane. The masked asshole was a psychopath like Nui Harime. So like *hell* was she gonna let him make the first move! Clenching her hand into a fist, she spat on the ground and snorted, “Fine! That just makes kicking his freaking ass easier! But don’t worry...”

She *clenched* her fingers, Threadcutter materializing within a twinkling flash of crimson stars, [“... I’m gonna clean up your goddamn mess!”](#)

The keychain dangling from her Keyblade jingled as she pointed Threadcutter at the night sky, magic circling around the razor-sharp wings. A *feeling* pulsed through her heart. Magic flushed through her body. And with a slight clenching of her fingers, a bright beam of light shot upwards before slamming into something high above the ground. Creating a portal out of the world.

Which was her ticket out of this place.

But she continued frowning. Almost glowering. A lot of this strange stuff still didn’t make sense. But after almost a month, she learned to accept things. Trying to figure everything out wasn’t worth the massive headache. Snorting as. She spun Threadcutter over her head, Ryuko paused momentarily, took a deep breath, before releasing the Keyblade. All while *pulling* on the light within her heart.

An errant breeze brushed against her face as the grass rippled underneath her sneakers.

But she wasn’t focused on that, and for good reason.

Hovering above the courtyard, floating between Xehanort and herself, was her Keyblade Glider. One that somewhat resembling a motorcycle. At least, it looked like one to *her*. Beatrix thought it looked like a bike. And Steiner claimed it resembled a surfboard.

Which was wrong! Brushing her hand against her chin, she stared at her ticket to finding Satsuki, Mako and the others. Deep blue light shone underneath the glider, kicking up clouds of dust. Jagged, razor-sharp wings surrounded the chassis. It looked badass. And with a predominantly crimson color and black highlights, there was no mistaking Threadcutter.

The Honnouji Academy symbol was even emblazoned on the chassis.

But there was one more thing she needed to do. Taking a deep breath, Ryuko cleared her mind. She pushed aside any remaining doubts and worries. And with maybe a little more force than necessary, slammed her hand against the piece of armor on her left forearm.

“Alright...”

Ryuko was surprised by the lack of disorientation. She'd expected a headache, spots in front of her eyes or maybe even wooziness. But as her Keyblade Armor *clanked*, the metal joints shifting with little friction, she didn't feel any different. With her curiosity settled for the moment, she placed one armored boot on the glider just *waiting* to fly. And finally managed to get a good look at her armor. It was dark blue. Almost *impossibly* dark blue. With purple highlights between the seams. And it was a lot more streamlined and smooth than either Terra's or Aqua's.

Turning over her hand, curling her fingers into a fist, she frowned behind the opaque visor. The armor was badass. And sure, it would help her find Satsuki and Mako.

But it wasn't half as good as Senketsu.

Not by a long shot.

“... let's do this!”

The blue light pulsating underneath Threadcutter intensified as she threw herself onto the glider. And she *knew* - almost instinctively - how the Keyblade Glider functioned, even though this was the first time she transformed her Keyblade. With a twist of her wrists, the magic propelling Threadcutter flushed into existence, causing the grass to ripple around Xehanort's boots. As the edges of her mouth tightened despite the anticipation of *finally* looking for Satsuki and Mako, Ryuko leaned forward, flexed her fingers and blasted into the moonlit skies.

Vanishing into the infinite darkness surrounding the Land of Departure.

Chapter 5.4

*So, first of all, Kill la Kill's getting a game. I'm honestly excited. But I'm willing to temper expectations until I see actual game footage instead of screenshots. But it's better than nothing. Particularly when I never expected anything besides *maybe* another movie. Second of all, Ryuko's finally moved onto her adventure. A journey that runs parallel to the events of Birth By Sleep. One that might intersect with Terra, Aqua and Ventus, but, more than anything, is her own. And we'll finally start seeing the rippling accidental influence of her actions upon the Realm of Light outside of non-canonical worlds.*

“DIE ALREADY!!!!”

She *ground* the front of Threadcutter's chassis against the last remaining Unversed, a fat, purple son-of-a-bitch that fancied itself a boxer. Just like that annoying club captain at Honnouji Academy. The energy streaming from her Keyblade Glider struggled against the monster's tough-as-nails skin. But it wasn't enough. Not on its own. So, with a snort, muffled underneath her Keyblade Armor, Ryuko planted her hands against Threadcutter and flipped backwards. She vaulted through the air head over heels, giving the Unversed a moment's reprieve. Light clung to her body, dancing in glowing crackles around her limbs.

And just as the ugly-as-shit monster began thinking it was in the clear, she pivoted midair, took a deep breath, and slammed both feet against the Keyblade Glider.

Smashing Threadcutter *through* the Unversed.

“AND STAY DOWN!!!”

As she landed in a crouch, Ryuko watched the fat bastard wobble backwards, cut neatly down the middle. A strangled scream screeching against her ears as the Unversed dissolved into dark

flames, vanishing before either half of its severed body touched the ground.

"Tch!"

Snapping out her arm, Threadcutter transformed back to normal as she looked back and forth. All but *daring* more Unversed to attack. What the hell was with this place? She wasn't on the world for a minute before the monsters formed out of the shadows. But with the problem dealt with, she marched across the empty plaza, each step causing her Keyblade Armor to *clank*. Sunlight reflected off her helmet as the empty village... the sense of nobody being around... started wearing on her nerves. Maybe the Unversed scared everyone off.

"Our hero!"

Ryuko blinked when *dozens* of people appeared out of nowhere. They were peeking out of windows. Leaning around buildings. One guy was even hiding under his cart. But the cheers and applause were too much. Maybe she would have stopped the Unversed no matter what, but she wasn't a hero. Even saying the word made her feel like a crap. A real hero wouldn't have allowed Vanitas to destroy her world. She wouldn't have failed to save everyone she loved.

"... thanks."

The appreciation carried no meaning, at least not to her, as she walked away from the crowd, passing through the enormous archway leading out of the village. She couldn't stand people calling her a hero. Not yet. Not until she fixed everything.

And with the first step through the arch, her Keyblade Armor dissipated into motes of light. It returned to the piece of normal-looking armor covering her left arm, allowing her to finally breathe fresh air. This world didn't look anything like Alexandria or Lindblum. There weren't airships or magical technology. But what she *could* see, looming over everything else, dark clouds and other crap

surrounding it, was a mountain. An enormous, almost obnoxiously tall mountain.

Something even Satsuki would claim was a little 'on the nose.'

Ryuko clinked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, "Guess that's the best place to start looking."

"Eh... I wouldn't count on it."

She pivoted at the suave voice. Threadcutter's keychain jingled as she instinctively leapt backwards, sneakers skidding against the dirt. The hell? Glaring sharply, Ryuko stared into the shadows just outside the archway. She glared at the man leaning against the wall, nonchalantly examining his fingernails. At least, the guy looked like a person. Pale blue skin, glowing yellow eyes and hair made from *literal* fire made him stick out like a sore thumb. But even so, that wasn't nearly enough to scare her, "Who the hell are you!?"

"Hades, Lord of the Dead, God of the Underworld."

Smoke carrying the acrid stench of death clung to the man's toga as he floated out of the shadows. It trailed across the ground, dancing in ways that defied gravity and nature. Immediately raising Threadcutter at his unnerving grin, she balked, more from confusion than shock, when the guy extended his hand, a piece of paper slipped between his fingers, "My card. Don't worry, this isn't a social call. Trust me, you *aren't* on the list."

Her mind ground to a screeching halt... then crashed.

Now that she thought about it, the guy's name sounded familiar. But she couldn't remember. Mikisugi had talked about ancient history at Honnouji Academy, but the nude pervert had been so *boring* she fell asleep after five minutes. And thanks to transferring to Rinne High School halfway through the year, she completely missed that subject. Without accepting the handshake, snorted under her breath. Beatrix said some worlds were stranger than others. That a lot of

them weren't anywhere as 'normal' as Alexandria. But if this guy was a 'god' or something, getting involved was bad for her health.

Which left only one option.

Threadcutter vanished into the depths of her heart as she turned away from the self-proclaimed god and began marching in the opposite direction, "Have fun counting souls or something."

"Not so fast..."

The guy appeared in her path before she noticed he moved. Or maybe he teleported. She didn't know. And, quite frankly, she didn't really care. But when he clapped his hands together and grinned, her fingers twitched at the shit-eating grin, "Alright, I get it. You have things to do... places to be... yadda, yadda. But if I could have just a *moment* of your time to say just how *spectacular* you fought."

Cocking his hand like a gun, Hades released a burst of flames that a few pots on the side of the road ablaze, "You didn't hold back. Not. One. Iota. You ground those insignificant bugs underneath your sandal without the slightest *shred* of empathy."

Traces of smoke danced around his fingers, clinging to the blue digit, "Which makes you *my* kind of warrior. Dark. Angry. And, most importantly, strong."

Her eyebrow twitched again.

And then a third time.

With every word that dripped from his mouth, Ryuko's mood worsened. Hades was smooth-talking her. Trying to get on her good side for whatever reason. And he was good. But after dealing with Mako's various attempts at successful distractions, he needed to try a lot harder. And make his brownnosing not so damn obvious. Because god or not, even *Gamagori* was never this blatantly obvious about kissing Satsuki's ass!

“Whatever.”

Shambling around the so-called god without batting an eye, she scoffed under her breath, “Go bother someone who gives a damn.”

“Whoa... whoa... whoa...”

Hades almost panicked. No, scratch that. He most certainly *didn't* panic. Concerned? Sure. A little worried? Maybe on a bad day. But he certainly *wasn't* panicking, “Okay... I think we got off on the wrong foot.”

Brushing aside the piercing glare that would put old Medusa to shame, he chuckled. Boy, this was one tough nut to crack. Angry, yet perceptive. Nothing like the heroes running amuck across the world. A chuckle reminiscent of thunder rumbled through his chest as he brought the schmoozing down a notch, just enough to keep her attention, “Which is why I’m gonna level with ya. Normally, whenever a newcomer comes waltzing through the door, I’d offer my services. For *you*, my friend, I’d guess you were lookin’ for a shortcut to put a kibosh on the darkness inside you. And believe me, there’s a *lot* of it. Upon which I, sort of an expert in that particular field, would offer to help... for a suspiciously low price.”

Ryuko’s *other* eye twitched, “... the hell are you talking about?”

“I’d go through the motions... claim that I can help you master that power... make you stronger... so on and so forth,” he rolled his wrist alongside every legitimate if somewhat dishonest piece of advice, “Ya know, standard contract. And then, when you least expect it... or, in your case, maybe not... I’d stab you in the back. The usual ‘tricked by the God of the Underworld’ routine. Blah... Blah... Blah...”

He paused, clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, “But you’re different. And comin’ from me, that *means* something.”

As astonishment and irritation danced across the girl’s expression, he took the opportunity to think. Alright, what did he know? The girl -

now that he mentioned it, he hadn't asked her name - had a lot of darkness. Enough to raise some questions. Nobody, and he meant *nobody*, had that much darkness without experiencing, at the very least, some side effects. But this girl looked healthy. The darkness was stewing inside her heart like an overstuffed vase. Of that, he was certain. Yet it felt different than normal. Brighter. Which, if he was being honest with himself, required throwing common sense off the Colossus of Rhodes.

"Okay, quick question. Divinity wouldn't happen to run in your family, would it?"

Stroking his chin as the teenager's expression shifted from 'dark and broody' to 'murderous' faster than Hermes could escape Hera's righteous indignation, he nonchalantly asked, "No estranged uncle with superhuman strength? Aunt with more than a few strange animals mingling around the front yard?"

Something *twitched* within Ryuko's heart, "I'm human! Got that!?"

"Eh... sure, whatever."

His question, the only important one, remained unanswered. However, with the benefit of hindsight, that was fine. The girl believed she was human. An obvious *lie*. But then again, it wouldn't be the first time some jackass had a brat and skipped out on child support. Even good-old Zeus, the most righteous prick in the world, didn't talk to his brat for almost fifteen years. Sure, maybe *he* had something to do with that. Plans to rule Mount Olympus and all that jazz. But that wasn't important. Despite the girl's rough demeanor and distinctly human behavior, she wasn't human by any definition of the word. She was something else.

What that something was, on the other hand, was the *real* question.

"Alright, time to get serious here."

He steeped his fingers together, leaned backwards, and smirked, "How can *I* help *you*?"

"That's awfully generous," Ryuko ignored the whispering voice in the back of her mind demanding that she tell Hades to 'screw himself.' Maybe this was a trap. Maybe this guy wanted nothing more than to take her soul or something. But she wasn't going to give up without a fight. And certainly not against someone *literally* on fire. Snorting under her breath, her lips twisted as she folded her arms, Threadcutter a single thought from cutting Hades down the middle, "What's the catch?"

"Now we're gettin' somewhere!"

Hades grinned at the girl's sudden, yet appropriately suspicious, acceptance, "This offer has *no* - zero, zilch, nada - attachments. Which, and trust me on this, isn't something I normally do."

"But, I know, I know."

"Right now, you're thinking, 'Hey, can I really trust this guy?' And lemme just say, if you were *anybody* else - literally, I'd fleece my own brothers for two silver coins - I'd agree with ya," the Lord of the Underworld pointed over his shoulder at the mountain looming over the world, "But unlike the idiots drinking ambrosia on yonder hill, I know better than to provoke the proverbial Chimera."

Ryuko didn't trust Hades.

Only an *idiot* would fall for his obvious bullshitting. And maybe Mako said to ignore first impressions, but she was right about this guy. He was sleazy as crap. She could literally watch the smugness ooze out of his mouth like disgusting sewer water. And his breath... ugh! It made her want to hurl. This guy - Hades or whatever - was the kind of smug asshole waiting to stab her in the back. Which was why, no matter what nonsense about 'divinity' or 'help' he mumbled, she was about to trust him, let alone give him the time of day.

But if he was being honest... if this wasn't one large con... she couldn't take that chance.

She still felt like an idiot before the question even left her mouth, "Alright, you want to help? I'm looking for someone. Think you can handle *that*?"

"Hmm... looking for someone... someone..."

Hades allowed the question to roll around his mind. Geez, talk about coloring inside the lines. This was her big request? Anyone else would have kissed his tuchus for the slightest *hope* of a consequence-free question. And all she wanted... the single *thing* that came to her angry mind... was finding someone? Well, beggars couldn't be choosers. Particularly when it got something like *her* out of his metaphorical, not-literal-fire, hair.

"Okay, let me think..."

His eyes swiveled back and forth. Alright, maybe this wasn't such an easy question. Straightforward, sure. But not easy. Still, what did he know? Judging from the girl's outlandish and strange clothing, she was from out of town. Which meant the person she was looking for... friend, sister, rival, etcetera... had to stick out like a sore thumb. Which helped, but not enough to deal with the annoying whisper in the back of his mind. Because if his instincts were right, and they usually were, lying to this girl would be terrible news for his health.

"There's Zeus's little pipsqueak..."

Grimacing at even *mentioning* his orange-haired nephew, Hades nevertheless extended one finger. And then several others as he paced across the road, "... several warriors are in town for the Games, none of them particularly interesting. This six-armed schmo tried stealing Caladborg from Poseidon. Got his tuchus handed to him. Didn't kick the bucket, though, which was a real shame."

"Oh, and last but certainly not least, little miss ice queen."

The Lord of the Underworld rubbed his temple and chuckled, which sounded similar to a strained cough, "Geez Louise, talk about a lousy reception. That broad was a piece of work. I mean, giving *me* the cold shoulder? Wow... and I thought *I* stared into the soul. Not to mention that bright... annoying... backdrop of light. Oy vey. What? Did Helios have another child when I wasn't looking?"

Ryuko's heart *froze*.

"What was her name?"

Hades grinned, and not simply because, for the first time, the teenager's permanently scowling façade was replaced with an expression more to his liking. Still, he couldn't sit back and bask in the moment. There were things to do, souls to collect, nephews to murder. With a nonchalant shrug, showing just how much he cared about her opinion, he floated several steps away, absentmindedly examining his fingernails, "Interested? Well, I'm afraid my offer was for *one* question. Now, if you want her name, I'm gonna need a little _."

Shink.

His smile petrified into a strained grimace when the moody teenager appeared in front of him, dust still clinging to her jacket. And it fell completely at the crimson blade pointed squarely between his eyes.

"I asked you a question!"

Sunlight shimmered against the Scissor Blade's razor-sharp edge as Ryuko *snarled*, anger flushing through her heart, "So spill it! What the hell was her name!?"

For a moment, the God of the Dead, most preeminent of all his brothers and sisters, took the opportunity to 'examine' the mysterious blade. He took in the girl's expression. But, more importantly, how her darkness not only pulsed, moving in ways that defied common sense, but danced and shifted. And that *light*. Oy vey... it sent

shivers down his spine. Alright, time to dial things back a bit before she decided to turn him into a shish kabob.

“Yeah huh, you think I’m intimidated? I mean, c’mon. Let’s get real here. You’re talkin’ to the guy who falls asleep listening to the screams of the damned.”

Casually leaning around the Scissor Blade, his voice not dropping an octave, he stroked his chin, “Besides, I’m not asking for much. Just one small favor.”

Ryuko wanted nothing more than to walk away. But the guy *knew* Satsuki. Sure, maybe he didn’t say her sister’s name or anything but a vague description, but if Satsuki came through this place, she had to believe. Her shoulders trembled from the conflict raging inside her heart. The Scissor Blade quivered in her fingers. In the end, however, despite the arrogance and smugness oozing from the god’s mouth, she hesitantly lowered her arm.

“What do you want?”

“There’s an event starting soon. The Games. Specifics? Ya don’t need them,” Hades strutted around the girl, one arm going through the motions, “Everyone will be there. Gods, heroes and the occasional scribe. All to see who’s the strongest in the world. Naturally, as God of the Dead, I have dibs on any unfortunate schmuck who doesn’t quite *live* up to expectations.”

Her eyes twitched... then twitched again... at where she knew Hades was going, “You want me to sign up?”

“Flattering... but no.”

Hades considered the request. The girl *would* be an interesting fighter. Dark. Moody. Powerful. She’d be perfect! She’d wipe the floor with the other chumps. But that was pushing his luck a little too far. “See, there’s this *one* schmuck mucking everything up. And he’s

good. *Really* good. If I didn't know better, I'd think Zeus had another snot-nosed little BRAT!!!"

His anger erupted into a cacophony of raging flames.

The flames crackled around his toga, blasting across the environment and brushing against the girl's face. Smoke wafted from his shoulders, transforming the landscape into a maelstrom of death and destruction. His skin turned reddish orange. It was enough to *melt* marble and concrete. But after taking the opportunity to rein in his temper, Hades scoffed out the side of his mouth, "Okay, long story short, he's bad for business. Now, me? I'm a hands-on kinda guy. I see a problem? I fix it. An unfortunate accident... choking on a bone... swallowed by a sea monster... ya know, the usual mishap. But thanks to divine bylaw, I can't touch, influence or manipulate participants outside the coliseum."

He spun around, grinning broadly enough to wake the dead, "That's where *you* come in."

"Forget it!"

Ryuko marched away from the bastard god without another word. She *saw* where Hades was going! What he wanted her to do! And he could stick that ridiculous, so-called offer up his ass and shove it! She might want to find Satsuki and Mako more than anything. And she was prepared to go the ends of the Realm of Light. But killing someone who had nothing to do with her problems? Like *hell* she'd even think about doing something that insane, "I ain't killing some guy just because he pissed you off!"

"Hahaha... did I say kill? Maim? Dismember? The thought never came to mind!"

Feeling he was one tiny misstep from losing his meal ticket, Hades teleported in front of the girl, "Look, if I wanted the guy dead... and the Furies following me all the way to Crete... I'd find someone a little more... what's the word... *disposable*. Which *you* aren't."

With a roll of his wrist, pale blue flames materialized above the palm of his hand, “Now this guy, the royal pain in my tuchus? He’s gotta lose. Which means *you* need to defeat him in one-on-on combat. Break his winning streak. Knock him down a peg or two. Turn him from a hero to a zero.”

Hades grinned and, having recaptured the girl’s attention, crushed the flames between his fingers, “Do this for me, and I’ll tell you everything about little miss ice queen. So, we have a deal?”

The unnerving smile made Ryuko’s skin crawl. And for a moment, she considered walking away. Sure, his offer sounded good. And maybe he knew about Satsuki. But sons of bitches like Hades never told the whole truth. They were full of half-truths and other words Satsuki made her learn. She didn’t know *what*, but Hades was holding something back. A loophole or secret about this guy he wanted her to fight. Something *important*. But she couldn’t risk everything by walking away.

She *needed* to believe he could help.

“If I kick this guy’s ass,” revulsion stabbed at her heart as she forced the words out of her mouth, “You’ll tell me everything, right?”

“C’mon, would I lie to you?”

As soon as the question passed through his lips, Hades realized that perhaps, given current company, that wasn’t the best choice of words. Eh, but it didn’t matter. He was being honest with the girl. An admission that poured cold water over his shriveled heart. But after ensuring his prize fighter, the meal ticket to get his plans back on track, realized none of his fingers were crossed, pointed over his shoulder, “Okay, forget I asked that! Point *is*, you’ll find the idiot at the coliseum over yonder hill. Tell him you’re challenging him to a fight. His peanut-sized brain will fill in the rest.”

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, the underworld doesn’t exactly run itself.”

He cocked his hand like a gun, flames licking the tip of his finger as he faded into darkness, "I'm countin' on ya to show this schmuck *real* power!"

"Hey! Wait just a damn -"

The question turned into a strangled curse when Hades vanished, leaving her standing in the middle of the road looking like an idiot. With her jaw clenched, the Scissor Blade scraping against the ground, Ryuko spat to the side. What the hell was with this weird shit? She wasn't here for five minutes and already some smug asshole tried pulling her into their goddamned plans! And not just any asshole, but a bastard stupid enough to think he could mess with her head. That she was gonna go along with his plans without stopping to think about things.

But, despite all that, something was seriously bugging her.

If Hades wasn't lying about Satsuki, where did she go? It didn't make any freaking sense. This world wasn't anywhere near Lindblum. And she *knew* Satsuki couldn't have a Keyblade because if she *did*, Yen Sid would have told her as soon as he found out. Which begged the question. Where did Satsuki go? No matter how strong or smart her sister was, she couldn't have simply vanished into thin air. Nobody was that freaking good. Not even Satsuki. And without the Keyblade, traveling between worlds, meeting new people and making certain the masked bastard was buried six feet under was impossible.

Except for one *other* way.

"... damn it."

She snorted out the side of her mouth. That didn't matter because Satsuki was alright. As she took a shuddering breath, tears almost spilled from her eyes. Maybe she was being emotional and stuff. But she couldn't give a rat's ass. No matter what her sister's been doing, if Satsuki managed to escape their world, then everyone... Mako, Mako's family, Gamagori and even Mikisugi... were somewhere in

the Realm of Light. Mako could be fine. Her best friend could be sleeping on some random world, safe and sound, full of stories to share when she found her.

For the first time in weeks, ever since she woke up in Lindblum after things went to shit, the worry and tension plaguing her every waking moment, no matter how happy, faded a little.

And that, more than anything, made up her mind.

“Tch!”

A sliver of annoyance plucked at her heart as she stared at Mount Olympus, “That bastard better not be screwing with me!”

Unknown Report 5

Unknown Report 5

The shade did little to alleviate the sweltering heat.

Nevertheless, hundreds of people mingled through the crowded plaza. Some were dressed in armor, shoulder pads and gauntlets constructed from the most basic metals. Others wearing nothing more than the togas on their backs. And a few, no more than a scant handful easily forgotten, carried themselves with an aura befitting the title of 'hero.' And concealed within the shadows cast by the enormous marble statue of Zeus in the center of the city's plaza, constructed with said god's blessing, stood a man clad in clothing different from the surrounding crowd.

With one foot propped against the statue's base, the man ignored the never-ending commotion. The zanbatou at his side, a massive cleaver-like sword nearly his height, obtained more than a few strange stares. But he disregarded them as well. The minutes passed in self-induced silence. His shoulders gently rose and fell. Breathing comfortably behind the high collar of his haori, the shade offering some respite from the weather, his left eye snapped open at a familiar presence.

Or, to be more specific, familiar *laughter* from the other side of the plaza.

But he waited until the man grew closer, the sound of bare footsteps and arrogant laughter earning several replies, before asking, "Any luck?"

"Are you serious?"

The other man waved off the question without batting an eye, "None of those chumps were worth the effort."

[“That wasn’t what I meant, Jecht.”](#)

Jecht sheepishly rubbed the back of neck. All at once, his confidence and prideful bluster, which made him the *best* fighter around, vanished, “Yeah... yeah...”

He nonchalantly leaned against the statue, scarred arms folded across the tattoo covering most of his chest. Letting out an annoyed huff of air, Jecht groaned under his breath. The orange and red sash covering his leg, a keepsake from home, was covered in multiple tears, fresh and recently stitched. His bare feet were calloused. And compared to the rest of the pansy-ass cowards populating the world, his dark skinned, muscular body stuck out like a sore thumb, “I’m workin’ on it, alright?”

A suspicious scoff was his only reply.

“I’d like to see you come up with a better idea!”

Jecht couldn’t understand his companion’s lack of faith. Oh, who the hell was he fooling? Auron never believed anything he said. The guy was a real stick in the mud. The kind of guy with no imagination. Dragging a hand down his grizzled face, fingers brushing against the unshaven stubble, he remembered why they were arguing. And his arrogance, frustration and annoyance gave way to a grumbling sigh.

“Anyway, I’ve been asking around. Talked to a few people. Ya know, those fancy-schmancy heroes. The ones strutting around the place like idiots.”

The sun vanished behind a cloud, temporarily casting the city into darkness, “Apparently, the winner of the Games gets to personally visit Mount Olympus. A one-on-one meeting with Zeus or something. And yeah, I know. I know. You’re gonna say it sounds like a long shot. Hell, I don’t believe it myself.”

He snorted out the side of his mouth, “But it’s better than nothin’.”

Auron closed his remaining eye as the crowd thing, leaving them momentarily alone. As much as he trusted Jecht, dwelling on faint possibilities, no matter how improbably, would only lead to disappointment. Something he knew quite well, "... the Destiny Islands."

A breeze swept through the dusty streets as he leaned backwards, staring over his sunglasses into the skies, "Sounds peaceful. You must have hated it."

"Don't be such a stiff."

Jecht slid down the statue until he was sitting on the ground. Damn it, why the hell did Auron bring that up? Sure, the islands *were* boring. But that was what made them perfect. They had tranquility and peace this backwards piece of crap world lacked. Groaning, he rubbed his shoulder, the corded muscles resisting his hand. Damn it, he missed the ocean. The constant sunny weather. The life he'd built using nothing but his own two hands. And, god damn it, he missed *them*.

He huffed at the emotions welling inside his calloused heart. Leaning backwards, arms folded against the nape of his neck, he stared into the deep blue skies, "Huh... I wonder how my brat's doin'?"

Auron quirked an eyebrow, "A family man? Heh... now I've heard everything."

"Hey! There's a lot about me you don't know!"

Snarling at the fallen monk, the misplaced warrior's frustration faltered upon hearing faint, almost amused, laughter. Before his very eyes, contrary to what he *knew* to be reality, Auron was laughing. Something he'd thought the stick in the mud was incapable of doing. Unable to comprehend what was happening, Jecht's mouth snapped shut. The awesome insult sitting on the tip of his tongue forgotten. And he scoffed, arms folded in childish petulance.

Alright, he'd graciously allow Auron the last laugh *this* time.

"Last I saw, Tidus was a screaming bundle of snot and tears. Always wakin' me up in the middle of the night crying like a little girl. A real handful."

Jecht could remember every detail about his son. He had one of the best memories in the world! But his grin faltered, replaced by well-concealed depression, as he gripped the back of his neck, "Geez... three years, huh? Damn it, without me around to teach him the ropes, he's gonna grow up to be a crybaby. The son of the Great Jecht, a girly wuss. How could I live with myself knowing my son's a laughingstock?"

Another chuckle left the normally stoic guardian's concealed mouth, "I'm sure he'll manage without you."

The underlying insult momentarily went over Jecht's head. But after a moment, and enough time to process everything, the former islander leapt to his feet. A smooth flip that brought him face-to-face with Auron, "Wanna bet? Tidus might only be three, but he takes after his old man. By the time he's *half* my age, everybody's gonna know his name! He'll be famous!"

"Is that fatherly pride?"

Auron chortled, more to himself than at Jecht's expense. But the amusement quickly dissipated, leaving behind an awkward silence. Closing his eyes, the gesture hidden by the opaque lenses of his sunglasses, the stoic guardian walked around his friend without another word. He took several heavy steps, each slightly displacing the dust covering the ground. And after a moment's hesitation, craned his head backwards, "... you never told me."

Jecht blinked, "Huh? Tell you what?"

"How you left the Destiny Islands."

A sense of morbid curiosity accompanied the statement. Behind his haori's collar, concealed from the world-at-large, Auron frowned as he absentmindedly picked up his zanbatou from the foot of the statue, hefting the massive katana onto his shoulder with a lazy shrug, "You never told me what happened."

"What's the point?"

The question drawled clung to the sweltering heat, making the already annoying weather even worse. And as he brushed off Auron's snooping, Jecht clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Damn it, why the hell was he being so moody? He had the perfect excuse. Something involving a storm. Maybe a few pirates. Hell, he could be creative! But he couldn't say it. Because truth be told, and god damn it if Auron found out, he didn't know. The last thing he remembered was training on Besaid Island. With his snot-nosed brat sleeping, it was the perfect place for some practice. Then there was a flash of light, some strange darkness and he woke up in an alley, raw fish and rancid meat dumped onto his face by an 'unfortunate' merchant.

Eh... he really should apologize to the guy for breaking his arm.

Eventually.

"No point crying about it."

Grunting as he flexed his shoulder, working the sore muscles into some semblance of function, Jecht effortlessly leapt onto the statue. He vaulted upwards, clearing the base in a single vault. And with one hand grasping Zeus's disturbingly-accurate toga, jabbed a thumb against his chest, proudly boasting for all to hear, "Because I'm gonna win the Games. The Great Jecht's the strongest hero in the world! Nobody comes close to matching *my* greatness!"

"You're not exactly 'hero' material, Jecht."

Auron shook his head, "With that attitude, the judges might disqualify at the door."

"I'd like to see them try!"

His toes curled against the polished bronze as, with a shit-eating grin, he jumped off the statue, landing in front of Auron in a kneeling crouch. Dusting off his hands, the calloused digits showing the fruits of his natural talent, Jecht chuckled as, in the distance, halfway across the city, he saw the coliseum. It was the center of attention. The place where warriors, villains and heroes fought to prove themselves the strongest. Where he, the invincible Sir Jecht, had an undefeated winning streak stretching twenty-five victories long. An accomplish he tried not to rub into Auron's face, "And it's not like I can hold back, ya know? I mean, half the chumps don't know the first thing about fighting. All they do is swing around a sword... scream out fancy names for their moves... and pose like idiots. It's freaking embarrassing just standing in the same room as them."

Giving the guardian a two-fingered salute, Jecht took several steps, stopped, and looked excitedly over his shoulder.

"Hey! You should come watch! Some lady wants to fight me. Normally I'd refuse, but after that misunderstanding with Atalanta, ya never know."

A single eye opened, "Sorry, I have other things to -"

"What else ya gonna do? Stand around and *brood* all day?"

Jecht interrupted Auron in the middle of his piece of crap excuse, "C'mon, it'll be fun! You can cheer as I wipe the floor with her ass!"

Auron didn't bother dignifying that comment with a response as Jecht jogged towards the coliseum. He watched, morbid curiosity rising in the depths of his heart, as the man broke out into a full-on sprint, using the additional speed to leap onto the surrounding buildings. Earning more than a few angry shouts. For what felt like

an eternity, the blistering sun beat against his neck. But eventually, after the crowd thickened, he took one step. And then another. Each punctuated by somber chuckling.

“Braska, what was it you said? ‘No one expects us to succeed?’”

Jecht

Chapter 5.5

[img:

https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/finalfantasy/images/6/6c/DFF2015_Jecht_Presentation_Screenshot.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/640?cb=20171013085541]

“C’mon already!”

It was bad enough waiting for the guy to show his face. The weather. The sun baking her skin. Everything about this world was annoying. But listening the faceless idiots whisper that she was just ‘some kid’ that shouldn’t hold a sword, let alone fight the champion? She was starting to understand why Satsuki always acted like she had a stick up her ass. This was god damn annoying! Shooting the nearest asshole, a thin idiot, the meanest glare she could, which immediately caused the guy to almost crap his toga, Ryuko hefted the Scissor Blade onto her shoulder.

Not Threadcutter.

Maybe the Keyblade would make everything easier. It was one of the most powerful weapons in the Realm of Light. But this guy, whoever he was, wasn’t a Heartless or Unversed. He was just some normal guy. And even if that meant not finding Satsuki, she wasn’t gonna play by Hades’ rules. This was *her* fight. She agreed to help kick this guy’s butt, not the other way around.

And she was gonna win *her* way!

Not to mention she didn’t trust Hades. Not one freaking bit! The guy was a world-class brownnoser who thought some cheap words would convince her to help him. Maybe that would have worked on other people. But her gut - no, her heart - was shouting in her ear that the so-called god was waiting in the shadows. And if experience

meant anything, the asshole was gonna backstab her at the last possible moment.

Thinking about his smug grin worsened her mood.

It might not help. And maybe it would bring her right back to square one. And sure, Beatrix taught her not to interfere with other worlds. But kicking the smooth-talking son of a bitch's ass for *screwing* with her hopes and dreams was gonna be a lot more satisfying than overpowering some random -

"It's him!"

"The Great Jecht is here!"

Ryuko frowned, and not by choice.

Out of nowhere, every idiot in the crowd, even the thin moron, began cheering. Their excitement electrified the coliseum as they chanted a single name. Or various versions with several titles and pointless shit added in front. Biting the inside of her cheek as a migraine developed somewhere deep in her heart, she dragged the Scissor Blade off her shoulder. She cracked her neck with an audible *pop* as the doors across the dusty arena opened outwards. None of that mattered. She couldn't care less about the guy or his winning streak. And it didn't matter if the crowd of idiots thought she was gonna lose.

Because the only thing that mattered was beating -

"Time for the star to shine!"

Her right eye twitched.

A massive greatsword shimmered against the sun. The rust-colored blur of razor-sharp and jagged teeth spun through the air, immediately getting her attempt before slamming into the ground across the arena, embedding itself halfway into the ground. And was immediately followed by a tanned, bare-chested man strutting into

the coliseum, a shit-eating grin stretched across his face. She watched the arrogant bastard act like he owned the place. She kept her anger in check when the guy opened his arms, signaling the crowd to *scream* his name.

The right side of her face, mouth and eyebrow, twitched when the guy pumped one arm into the air, roaring out a response to the ear-deafening cheers.

“Alright.”

Jecht basked in the crowd’s adulation as long as possible. As the reigning champion, everybody knew his name. But business was business. And ignoring his challenger, no matter how strong or weak, was bad sportsmanship. Whistling softly at the chants and cheers still reaching his ears, he turned around, one hand about to pluck Seafang out of the ground, “Let’s see what you’re made of.”

His heart promptly sunk when he saw who challenged him.

“It’s a kid?”

This was the lady calling him out. Jecht felt like someone stiffed him on the bill. From the bluster and language behind the note left in the coliseum’s lobby, he’d expected one hell of a woman. Maybe an amazon or demi-goddess. Not some teenager. Sure, she had an interesting sword. And maybe her posture screamed ‘seasoned fighter,’ but that wasn’t the point. And he groaned in the back of his throat, expressing his disappointment not just with the day, but life in general.

“Ugh... god damn it.”

What he wouldn’t give for a cold beer. The annoyance oozing from the girl was adorable, but he wasn’t in the mood for fighting a hormonal teenager. Especially one who had an anger problem. Puffing out his cheeks, Jecht groaned again. He folded his arms across his bare chest, cocked his head sideways and, as the crowd

continued cheering, awkwardly asked, “Hey kid, there’s no shame walking away, ya know? Challenging the Great Jecht takes guts. I’m sure your friends won’t call you a coward or nothin’.”

Ryuko didn’t know what to make of the guy.

But she still bit the inside of her cheek, clearing the anger from her heart. If this guy was the champion, that meant he was *strong*. And getting angry over the asshole’s massive ego and pompous attitude would end up with her face-down in the dirt. Yet her eye continued twitching. Her postured shifted. And a strangled grunt forced itself through her clenched teeth.

After hearing the guy talk down to her like she was a freaking kid, any reservations about kicking his half-naked ass were tossed into the trash, “It sounds like your backing out.”

The anger in her voice was palpable as she spun the Scissor Blade around her wrist. The hardened Life Fiber weapon transformed into a razor-sharp maelstrom of crimson death, earning a few cheers from the crowd before, in one furious motion, she pointed it at Jecht, “What? You too scared of fighting a girl?”

“Well, you’ve got spunk. I’ll give ya that much.”

Jecht didn’t which god he managed to piss off, but his day was quickly going from bad to worse. He loved fighting as much as the next hero. And sure, the crowds of fans cheering his name was a nice touch. But fighting a kid? Man, that didn’t feel right. Even if the girl was a teenager, his heart just wasn’t into it. But what choice did he have? If he backed down after accepting her challenge, he’d be labeled a coward. Nobody would think he was a hero. They wouldn’t let him participate in the Games, which meant getting home would be out of the picture. And if he fought her?

He sighed.

“So, you wanna play, huh? Fine by me, I guess.”

Deliberately ignoring the girl's angsty scowl, Jecht proceeded to stretch. He bounced on his feet, hands propped against his knees as the corded muscles loosened. Maybe fighting a kid wasn't something any self-respecting man normally dreamed of doing. But that didn't mean he couldn't hold back. If this girl was determined to fight, who was he to argue? A few love taps, one or two restrained punches, allowing a free shot by purposely lowering his guard and before long, maybe a minute at the most, she'd give up. Rescuing his honor as a man.

Nevertheless, to keep up appearances, he acted like nothing changed. Tapping the back of his hand against Seafang, Jecht derisively scoffed, "Just don't go cryin' home to your mom."

The Scissor Blade rose another inch as Ryuko snorted, "All I'm hearin' are excuses! Just shut up and fight already!"

"C'mon, what's with the long face? Don't tell me you're intimidated by the invincible Sir Jecht?"

He might have laughed but on the inside Jecht couldn't believe his terrible luck. Were all teenagers this goddamn moody about everything? It felt like someone sucked all the fun from the room. Crap, did this mean Tidus was gonna grow into a crybaby? Damn, like hell he was gonna let that happen! But geez, talk about a killjoy. Would it hurt the girl to lighten up or crack a freaking smile? Maybe she had problems. Everybody had problems. Even he had a few issues. But that didn't mean her moodiness had to be goddamn contagious.

With a half-smirk, he propped his arm against Seafang, "You're tremblin' in your shoes, aren't ya? Gonna start cryin'?"

"Says you!"

An infuriated growl tore its way out of Ryuko's throat.

Now the guy was talking about himself in the third person? How goddamn arrogant could he get?

Her mouth twitched as she hefted the Scissor Blade overhead before stabbing it into the ground next to her foot. No wonder Hades wanted this asshole dead. Less than a minute and she wanted nothing more than to wipe the smirk off his goddamn face. But even listening to his never-ending insults changed nothing. The so-called god might have info on Satsuki... maybe he even knew where to find her... but she wasn't gonna kill the bastard. Asshole or not, the guy was a goddamn hero. People looked up to him. He might have saved most of their lives from a monster.

But that *didn't* mean she wasn't gonna break his nose!

Punching one hand against the other, she viciously cracked her knuckles, "I'm gonna kick your freaking ass until *you* start crying like a baby!"

"Ha! Now we're talking!"

As much as he disliked fighting some random kid off the streets, Jecht couldn't deny her enthusiasm. Not to mention her threat wasn't half-bad, if a little boring. Rolling his neck, bones popping back into place, he grumbled before growling over his shoulder, "Hey! Ya mind starting this damn thing? We ain't got all day!"

The referee, a portly man *clearly* unused to the level of animosity sparking between the fighters, cleared his throat, "Are both participants ready?"

Ryuko spat on the ground while crackling her knuckles a second time. Across the arena, once more leaning against Seafang as the crowd chanted his name, Jecht lazily folded his arms and smirked.

"R-Right."

Glancing between the challenger and reigning champion, the referee took a few steps back before raising one arm skyward, “On the count of three, you may begin. One... two...”

“... THREE!!!”

Ryuko was halfway to Jecht before the referee untangled the knot in his toga.

As the guy clambered into the stands, attempting to get out of harm’s way, she cocked her right arm backwards. Annoyance flushed through her heart as she focused everything on the smug asshole grinning like an idiot. Leaning sideways as she skidded to a halt, reaching the arrogant prick while the crowd’s cheering abruptly ended, Ryuko clenched her fingers until every knuckle bled white from the pressure. She planted her sneaker against the ground in front of Jecht’s foot for extra ‘oomph,’ her muscles rippled as she swung with everything in her disposal. Her lips pulled back into a snarl at his eerie calmness.

And then her momentum suddenly *stopped*.

“Not half-bad, kid.”

With an ear-wrenching *clang* heard across the coliseum, Jecht intercepted the girl’s punch. And as her fist collided with the metal armor covering everything below his left shoulder, an expensive piece of armor synthesized using some spare orichalcum and mithril by that uppity moogles, he grinned.

“I almost felt that.”

His easygoing façade faltered when the teenager took the ill-phrased advice as a challenge. And in that split second, the power behind her punch increased. Damn, she was strong. Just what did she eat for breakfast? With sweat dripping from his chin, Jecht set aside his bravado. As he found himself putting more effort into acting like

nothing was wrong, he attempted to push back. But it wasn't enough. The girl was still, against all odds, overpowering him.

Shit, at this rate, she was gonna embarrass him in front of his fans.

"HAH!"

Shifting his center of balance, he leaned backwards without warning, forcing the girl along for the ride. They briefly separated, dust clinging to his shorts. And as the teenager attempted to regain the offensive, Jecht decided to play some aggressive defense. In one smooth, well-practiced motion, he collapsed onto the ground, one hand planted for support, swung his leg upwards and *kicked* the girl halfway across the arena.

"Ya got guts comin' at me with your fists."

As the girl landed on her feet, little worse for wear, Jecht scoffed. Geez, she was made of tough shit. Punching orichalcum-enhanced mithril and not a single broken bone? Not even *he* could accomplish something that damn impressive.

Maybe this wasn't gonna be an easy fight.

But that didn't mean the girl had a chance in hell of winning. He was the Great Jecht! He fought and defeated countless heroes. Some with stupid mystical powers and others being sons and daughters of freaking gods! Giving his shoulder one last look-over, just in case the teenager broke something when he wasn't paying attention, Jecht grumbled upon remembering something he should have already asked, "Hey, before I forget, what's yer name?"

Ryuko's mouth twisted into a snarl, "... it's Ryuko, dipshit!"

She was growing sick and tired. Every word that spewed from his mouth grated on her nerves. It was taking everything not to summon Threadcutter and *end* the fight! But with a forced grimace, Ryuko swallowed the bile rising in her throat. Getting pissed wouldn't help.

The guy was fast. And seriously strong. If she lost her temper over a few cheap insults, stuff she'd heard a million times at Honnouji Academy, he was gonna kick her ass.

And losing to an arrogant narcissist who spoke about himself in the third person was the *last* thing on her mind!

Dragging a finger against the side of her mouth, she licked the inside of her cheek. There was one trick she could try. It wasn't gonna be easy. Not by a long shot. But if she successfully pulled it off, the bastard wouldn't know what hit him. The fight would be as good as over. And Hades, wherever the so-called god was hiding, would finally tell her everything he knew about Satsuki.

"Take this!"

A phantasmal wind blew through the arena as she drew upon the massive strength dwelling inside her heart. Breathing deeply through her nose, focusing her mind and heart upon what she was about to do, Ryuko cocked her right arm backwards. She focused every mote of available magic into her fist. More than enough that, if she screwed this up, the backlash would hurt like a freaking bitch! But with Jecht somehow confident she wasn't worth his time, Ryuko threw caution to the sidelines as she lurched forward, stomped the ground and *punched* the air.

"METEOR PUNCH!!!"

More than a dozen fireballs exploded from her fist alongside successive *whumps*. The scorching magic burned her skin. It caused the crowd to cheer her name for some odd reason. But the suffering was worth the priceless expression plastered on Jecht's face, even if she never intended to hit him with the technique. The guy was just too fast. He was gonna dodge every fireball. Leaving her back at square one.

Which was why she waited until he began dancing around her Meteor Punch before *bum-rushing* the bastard.

It should have worked.

She did everything perfectly.

But at the last possible second, Jecht swung his arm, dissipating the nearest fireball. And with a shit-eating grin plastered across his face, twisting his upper body, flexed his knees and leapt straight into the air.

Right over her fist.

“Shit!”

Snarling viciously in the back of her throat, Ryuko skidded to a halt, her sneakers dragging against the ground, and craned her head backwards. God damn it! The guy dodged everything without missing a beat! The corners of her mouth twisted into a hate-filled sneer as she watched Jecht rapidly spin above the arena like a tornado. She winced when the bastard moved across the sun, visible streams of moisture and air wrapping around his body. Adrenaline flooded her veins, slowing time to a halting crawl as arcs of lightning and electricity began to surround the smug bastard. The crackling magic clinging to his half-naked form.

This was getting dangerous.

“Enough of this freaking crap!”

She winced prematurely. This was gonna be really painful, maybe more than getting several swords thrust through her body, but Ryuko made up her mind. Nothing was going to change it. As the bastard kicked downwards, rapidly descending back to the ground, she didn't bother dodging or avoiding the obviously dangerous attack. She didn't move at the last possible moment. Didn't consider putting some distance between them. Instead of doing the *smart* thing... something Satsuki and Beatrix would agree was the only good move... Ryuko braced herself as Jecht's leg swung towards her neck, lightning crackling against his skin.

God damn it, this was gonna hurt like a bitch!

Spittle flew between her clenched teeth as she propped her left hand against her forearm, stopping Jecht's foot dead in its tracks. The concussive force behind the powerful kick echoed throughout the coliseum. With a grunt, Ryuko felt something almost give. And then *everything* hurt when the electricity, with nowhere else to go, decided to pass through her body into the ground. Lightning crackled across her skin. It burned her flesh. Left scorch marks on her clothes. But those minor inconveniences meant nothing. They *were* nothing.

Not when her plan *worked*.

"You goddamn bastard..."

Ryuko pushed into the ground, arresting her momentum with a defiant grimace. The smell of burning rubber filled her nose. But despite half of her body feeling like crap, she managed to snarl, "... I'm through..."

Pushing through the agonizing pain, she grabbed Jecht's ankle before the bastard could move. And cocking her other arm backwards, fingers clenched tightly enough that her knuckles trembled, she stomped against the ground and *smashed* her fist into his nose.

"... MESSING AROUND!!!"

A whispering hush fell upon the crowd when Jecht's head angrily snapped backwards.

The coliseum fell deathly silent as he staggered back several steps, blood dribbling from his chin onto the dusty ground.

"Eh... that wasn't too bad."

Jecht brushed aside Ryuko's astonishment as he gingerly touched his nose. Damn it, she packed one hell of a punch. He couldn't

remember the last time someone hit him that freaking hard without special gimmicks. Sure, the kid might have used magic to knock him off balance. And yeah, it wasn't the most sportsmanlike move. But that didn't change the fact that an inch closer... if he'd reacted a split-second later... she would have broken his nose with nothing more than pure physical strength.

And that was terrifying.

"Gotta say, didn't expect you to be this strong."

Spitting a glob of snotty blood onto the ground, Jecht folded his arms and grumbled. For the second time since waking up, he was starting to find his cheering fans distracting, "But you should quit while you're ahead. Ain't no shame giving up."

"Aw, what's the matter?"

A vicious grin stretched across Ryuko's face, "Is the 'Great Jecht' afraid of getting his ass kicked?"

"Alright then..."

That settled it. Sure, he'd had his doubts, but now Jecht *knew* Ryuko wasn't an ordinary kid. Most people, even some of the heroes, couldn't block his Jecht Kick without breaking some bones. Or, at the very least, getting a few hairlines fractures. It was something he knew from experience. And those that were strong enough to accomplish the impossible were shocked into unconsciousness by his magic. But Ryuko? Damn it, she not only blocked his Jecht Kick, she managed to counter with a powerful haymaker that still hurt.

Spitting one more wad of blood onto the ground, Jecht abruptly stopped smiling, "I think it's about time we skipped the warm ups. Cause holding back like this is a real pain in the ass."

"Tch!"

Ryuko snorted but didn't dignify the question with an answer.

Not this time.

Sliding her foot outwards, she rolled her tongue against the inside of her cheek. Something about the bastard was different. If she didn't know better, it was almost as if Jecht was starting to take the fight seriously. Which was gonna be a problem. Rolling her shoulders before cracking her knuckles, she focused everything on the bastard. She watched his posture. How he stood. How his stance changed in the drop of a hat. She focused on his feet, noticed the ball of his right foot leaving the ground.

A warning that allowed her to dodge the insanely-fast cross punch.

"It doesn't matter if you're freaking fast!"

Time slowed to an agonizing crawl as the upper half of her body twisted clockwise. The cheering crowd faded into the background. The world itself turned shades of grey. And with an irritated scoff passed between her clenched teeth, Ryuko noticed every rippling muscle and scarred callous covering Jecht's arm. Her stormy eyes tracked the punch passing inches from her face. The guy was fast. *Really* fast. But he wasn't anywhere close to Beatrix's stupid and unfair level of speed. Because if the bastard was that fast, she'd already be lying somewhere on the ground, blood spewing from her mouth.

"Because I ain't gonna lose!!!"

She waited until Jecht over-extended himself before looping her right arm around his elbow. Dust trailed from her jacket as she lurched forward. A curse faltered on the tip of her tongue as she clamped her other hand around the bastard's bloodied and messed-up face. And with her feet briefly leaving the ground, Ryuko shouted, pulled her arm backwards and attempted to *slam* the back of his head into the ground.

Only for a pair of hands to grab her shoulders.

And a calloused knee to *smashed* into her stomach, launching her skyward alongside an explosion of lightning.

“Gah!”

A trace of blood spewed from her lips as the air was forcibly pushed from her lung. But before she touched the ground, Ryuko managed to regain control. Her right shoulder flared with pain when it slammed into solid rock. Twisting onto her feet after the first bounce, she dragged her fingers along the arena’s floor, the armor covering her left hand faintly glowing. And before she stopped moving, brief flickers of lightning still crackling around her body, Ryuko noticed the shadow growing larger by the second.

“Screw you!”

Snorting through her teeth, Ryuko confronted Jecht just as the guy’s arm swung towards her face. Enough was enough! She was sick and tired of this bastard! With anger beginning to cloud her heart, she leaned around the cross punch, only slightly bothered by the pressure deforming her cheek. Dust clung to her clothes as, in the same smooth motion, she curled her left arm around his bicep. She stomped one sneaker against the ground, the rubber sole *burning* as she found the right spot. And planting her other hand on his waist, grabbing his stupid pants for support, she spun around, cursed loudly and *threw* him into the nearest wall.

Hard enough that she was *damn certain* he went through it.

Only to *gasp* when the bastard immediately shot out of the cloud of dust and smoke, his calloused hand clasped around her face.

“Not bad,” Jecht smirked despite the blood oozing from the cut above his right eye, “But me...”

“... I got no such things as limits!”

He shifted one foot in front of the other as he spun around. A rebellious scream erupted from his bloodied teeth. His grin widened as he waited for the best opportunity before, planting one bare foot against the ground, he released Ryuko, allowing her to crash *through* the coliseum's far wall.

"Ugh! Gonna be sore in the morning."

Jecht felt like complete shit.

Everything *hurt*. His shoulders were bruised. Several ribs were likely broken. And he was certain something in his hand wasn't working. Not to mention his face. Geez, Ryuko had been strong. But why the hell was he worried? He won. She lost. Besides, it wasn't like he killed her. No, a kid like Ryuko couldn't be beaten easily. She was probably unconscious. Maybe nursing a few broken bones. Nothing a day or two of rest... plus a local healer's services... couldn't fix.

"Hey!"

Shouting over the crowd cheering his name, Jecht snapped at the stunned referee, "You gonna stand there all day gawkin'?"

The referee gawped before raising his arm, "Five... four... three... two..."

"What the hell... are you... counting for?"

Ryuko was *pissed*.

Blood stung her eyes as she gripped the boulder sitting on her chest. A piece of rock bigger than her body. It had to weigh more than a ton. But with the crowd falling deathly silent, her fingers dug into the jagged stone. There was a rumble. An audible *creak*. And then, with the referee's eyes widening, whether from shock or surprise she had no idea, Ryuko pushed the rock off her chest like it was nothing.

"You stay out of this!"

She rolled her tongue against the inside of her mouth before spitting blood onto the ground. Like hell she was gonna just sit back and let Jecht win! Forcing herself to stand, each move easier than the last, she lurched out of the wall. Blood streamed down her face. It dripped from her chin. Her fingers were slick. In other words, she looked like shit. But it finally helped shut the crowd up. It turned their annoying cheering into hushed silence, allowing her to *glare* at Jecht with as much force as she could muster.

Yet despite wanting nothing more than to beat the bastard into a bloody pulp, Ryuko wasn't angry at *him*. Sure, he was an asshole. And everything he said grated on her nerves. But the guy was one hell of a fighter.

But she was already feeling better.

And that meant the fight *wasn't* over.

"Where the hell do you think you're going!?"

Ryuko grabbed the Scissor Blade, spit out one more glob of blood, before yanking the sword out of the ground, "This fight ain't finished!"

"Geez, you're one tough kid."

Jecht was mildly surprised at Ryuko's tenacity. He was *sure* the Jecht Shot would be enough to knock her unconscious, "And here I thought this was gonna be a piece of cake..."

He knew what was about to happen. It wasn't gonna be pretty or nice. And it might end up being one of the most painful experiences of his life. But as reigning champion, he couldn't stand down. Not after Ryuko came all this way and *proved* she wasn't any ordinary kid. Groaning breathlessly as guilt and self-loathing manifested in his heart, Jecht somberly walked across the arena and pulled Seafang from its temporary perch.

"But play-time's over!"

Effortlessly hefting the greatsword onto his shoulder, Jecht smirked at Ryuko, matching her frustration, “The real fight starts now!”

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Chapter 5.6

“The invincible sir Jecht?”

Inside the coliseum, his back pressed against the masonry, Auron snorted. A quiet, almost uncharacteristic sound muffled by his collar, “Is that what you’re calling yourself now?”

Propping his foot against the wall, he leaned forward when another round of ear-deafening cheers erupted from the enthusiastic crowd. He might have conceded to Jecht’s demands, but watching the fight was another issue. Thus, when the barely audible voice of the referee reached his ears, Auron promptly focused his thoughts inward. While pessimistic compared to Jecht’s boundless optimism, he doubted the so-called gods knew anything about the Realm of Light. The denizens were too insular. The lack of knowledge concerning. And, as Braska was prone to repeating every chance he could, most worlds were simply unaware of the others.

The smallness of their existence defined them.

“METEOR PUNCH!!!”

His eyebrow quirked at the frustrated voice overtaking the crowd. In what felt like an instant, the sweltering afternoon was momentarily replaced by chaotic orange and red, immediately followed by several massive explosions. Yet, with one hand, Auron calmly brushed motes of dust off his shoulder before closing his eye, ignoring the disappointed muttering from those who barely missed witnessing something that was, in their minds, simply incredible. The girl was putting up quite the fight. More than he - or rather, Jecht - expected. It took skill and talent utilizing techniques that powerful.

And judging from her particular choice of language, she wasn’t quite fond of his constant boasting and ridicule.

“It appears Jecht finally met his match.”

Auron chuckled, inadvertently earning the attention of several spectators. If such a thing as karma existed, he was certain Jecht was finally paying up. And with interest. Only someone like Jecht, through nothing more than sheer coincidence, would stumble into a fight against someone capable of denting their arrogance. A feat of strength nobody, not even several of the so-called gods, managed to accomplish.

Chortling in the back of his throat, the former guardian almost conceded to the growing temptation of glancing into the arena. If not out of curiosity, then just to watch how Jecht rescued his floundering

-

Something *twitched* against the fabric of reality.

“Hmm?”

Dust settled... then remained frozen midair... as he stepped away from the alcove. With only the hollow *stomp* of his boots breaking the dead silence filling the corridor, Auron reached towards the zanbatou carefully propped against the wall. Effortlessly hefting the massive blade onto his shoulder, its heavy weight a small comfort, he narrowed his single eye. Something was wrong. Shafts of sunlight interrupted the darkness inside the coliseum's interior. Concession stands, souvenirs and other forms of merchandising stretched down the corridor as far as he could see. Spectators, tourists and fans were walking back and forth.

There was even someone wearing a ridiculous Jecht costume.

But not a single soul was moving.

Waving his hand in front of a woman caught midstride, Auron looked around the frozen landscape, “Temporal magic?”

No, this was different. Lowering his arm, he carefully stepped to the woman's right before peering over his shoulder. While never particularly adept at such difficult magic, Braska had cast temporal spells once or twice. Stopra and Stopga. From what he remembered, time magic was designed to pause the flow of time within an area. To prevent anyone caught within the epicenter from moving. But this felt like the complete opposite. Staring outside into the scorching afternoon where Jecht and Ryuko were frozen mid-fight, the latter landing a rather devastating punch to the former's face, Auron subtly shifted his hold on his zanbatou.

"I take it you're the cause of this?"

He slowly turned around, shrugging at the cloaked figure standing opposite the alcove. With the hood pulled over their face, full-length black coat covering every inch of their body, it was impossible to determine who, or what, they were. But he didn't lower his guard. Not in the slightest. And when the mysterious figure abruptly *flickered*, faded afterimages and faint clones superimposed over his body, Auron's eye narrowed. He waited patiently for them to make the first move. His fingers curled around the zanbatou on his shoulder. Yet when more than half a minute passed without a single word exchanged between them, he threw decorum to the sidelines and decided to take a page out of Jecht's book.

"Are you here for me... or Jecht?"

The mysterious figure didn't respond to the question. Instead, they raised their right hand, fingers grasping the still air. A moment passed. Then another. And when he'd begun growing suspicious, clenched their fingers, summoning a pair of ethereal blades within a brief flicker of electricity and darkness.

"Humph."

Snorting derisively at the obvious taunt, Auron slid his left foot along the ground. Adrenaline flooded his veins as the mysterious figure shifted into their own battle stance, one ethereal sword held parallel

across their body and the other behind their head. Anger simmered in the darkest recesses of his mind as he forced his left arm free, the blood red haori fluttering to his waist. And with a guttural growl, fluidly swept the massive zanbatou off his shoulder.

[“So be it!”](#)

Chapter 5.7

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/3/3c/Kill-3-25-matoi-ryuuko-bleeding.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/640?cb=20150413042159>]

Clang!

A trace of blood dripped from Ryuko's cheek.

Clang! Clang!

The Scissor Blade trembled when the recoil sent her skidding backwards.

Clang!

Dragging one hand against the ground, Ryuko snarled before immediately rushing Jecht.

Clang! Clang!

Multicolored flashes of sparks burned her face while the Scissor Blade *sung* with every strike.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Ryuko ducked beneath Seafang, allowing the greatsword to pass over her head. Shifting her center of balance onto one foot, she strafed around the half-naked bastard, crimson trailing from the Scissor Blade's razor-sharp edge.

Crack!

Pain lanced through her hand when Jecht pivoted faster than expected, smashing the edge of his knee directly into her wrist. Forced off-balance by the underhanded blow, Ryuko glared at the

half-naked, arrogant bastard as her Scissor Blade spiraled through the air. The blinding shimmer of sunlight reflecting off the rapidly spinning hardened Life Fiber weapon stung her eyes. But even so, she remained focused on what was *really* important. Feinting to the left before quickly ducking to the right, she dodged Seafang, the accompanying rush of wind rustling her feathery hair. Her toes curled within her dusty sneakers as she pushed off the ground, barely avoiding the following uppercut to the stomach.

And planting her hand against Jecht's wrist for balance, Ryuko twisted clockwise before smashing her foot against his face.

"Aw, what's the matter?"

As the cocky prick stumbled backwards, blood dripping from his nose, she landed with a soft *thump*, one hand propped against the ground. And a shit-eating grin spread widely across her dirtied face.

"Don't tell me that hurt!"

Her hand snapped outwards mid-taunt, perfectly catching the Scissor Blade with an echoing *clank*.

Determination roared in the depths of her heart as she pushed off the ground, closing the distance between herself and Jecht. Before the bastard finished cursing, she placed one sneaker over the other, transforming her dead sprint devolved into an awkward skid. Sparks flared around the Scissor Blade as it dragged through the ground, leaving a massive gash before she stopped, snarled between clenched teeth and swung upwards.

And when the bastard responded by corkscrewing Seafang faster than expected, she adjusted her angle of approach.

A trick she picked up from Beatrix.

She flexed her wrists, causing the Scissor Blade to slice along the edge of the greatsword. Her dad's weapon skidded against the

razor-sharp teeth. Each bounce aggravated both of her shoulders. Each *thump* of the hardened Life Fiber sword slamming against Seafang filled the air between their faces with multicolored sparks, burning her skin and bringing the massive greatsword another inch closer to her body.

But the brief discomfort was worth it.

“I thought you weren’t gonna hold back!”

Clang!

She snorted as, in a blur of clashing metal and hardened Life Fibers, Seafang appeared out of nowhere, forcing her to prop the Scissor Blade against her stomach. The ridiculous strength behind the sneak attack caused her feet to momentarily leave the ground. She hovered above the coliseum, dust trailing from her sneakers. But she eventually landed. And she she finally did, skidding back another meter or two, she scoffed at the fresh wound on Jecht’s shoulder, “Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you were bluffing!”

“Think you’re a big shot, huh?”

Jecht wasn’t *too* bothered by the minor scrape. Hell, he saw more blood cutting himself shaving the other day. But bravado aside, things just weren’t going as planned. Sure, the crowd was chanting his name. It should have been enough. But Ryuko wasn’t anything like the other heroes. She wasn’t an idiot with a personality way too big for their head. For starters, she wasn’t weak. Not by a long shot. And more importantly, something that repeatedly punched him in the face over the last couple of minutes, there was the small chance he could actually *lose*.

And that just sucked.

“Ugh... ya know something? Fighting like this ain’t gonna solve anything.”

Rolling his shoulder, he flipped Seafang overhead before thrusting the greatsword into the ground between his feet, "So, how 'bout we solve this the old-fashioned way. No fancy magic or weapons. Just our bare fists. Man-to-man. Err... man-to-woman."

He punched one bloodied hand against the other, "What do ya say, Ryuko? Up for the challenge?"

"Fine by me!"

Ryuko sunk the Scissor Blade into the floor with a solid *thunk*, "Just don't start cryin' when I force those words back down your throat!"

A moment passed in absolute silence as Jecht smirked.

Another second ticked away before Ryuko pushed off the ground, racing towards the backward with one arm cocked over her shoulder.

And then part of the coliseum exploded into a maelstrom of wind and fire.

"What the -"

The question barely escaped her mouth before the aftershock of watching a freaking tornado burst through the coliseum caught up with her mind. In that instant, Ryuko stumbled before catching her balance. She pivoted awkwardly on her right foot, momentum still carrying her forward, causing her fist to scrape against Jecht's cheek. But the smug bastard wasn't paying attention to her. Hell, she wasn't paying attention to *him*! They both watched, entranced for different reasons, the hurricane exploding from the coliseum, their battle forgotten.

"Hey!"

Jecht bellowed at the top of his lungs, anger simmering within his heart. The crowd was panicking, and for good reason. A tornado popping out of nowhere wasn't exactly natural even in this messed-

up world. People were screaming. They were fleeing away from the tornado, running through the stands and across the arena. Quickly leaving him and Ryuko completely alone.

“Who the hell’s screwing with our fight?”

He got his answer when something sailed out of the explosion and slammed into the opposite side of the coliseum. Pivoting on the spot, the fire tornado already dissipating, Jecht glared into the smoke and dust. And when things settled, when he could *finally* see what almost took off his head, his heart sunk. Stuck in the wall, slouched forward and barely breathing, was Auron. The guy looked like he went through hell. Cuts and burns littered his body. His zanbatou remained clasped in his unmoving fingers, a large and worrying crack tracing down the blade.

“AURON!”

He vaulted the arena wall in an effortless jump heedless of the consequences.

Still standing in the arena, strange memories whispering in her heart, Ryuko ignored the urge to help.

Because something else was coming.

In one swift motion, she yanked the Scissor Blade out of the ground. Spinning upon her heels, pivoting sharply enough that she almost tripped, Ryuko’s head snapped sideways. It was barely visible. Nothing more than a transparent shadow. But something resembling shimmering darkness was making a beeline straight toward Jecht.

“Bastard!”

She broke into a sprint, pushing herself faster than humanly possible. The concept of *failing*... of allowing something, or anything, to happen to Jecht... spurred her onwards. And in the moment between heartbeats, as the wind rushing through her hair and

Jecht's efforts to help Auron slowed to an agonizing crawl... Ryuko leapt into the stands.

CLANG!

The assassin's ridiculous strength that took her completely by surprise.

Gritting her teeth, spittle flying between her grimacing lips, Ryuko dug her sneakers into the solid rock as her momentum - hell, the guy's freaking power - forced them halfway across the coliseum. The nauseating smell of burning rubber assaulted her nose as she struggled against the identical pair of glowing blue swords attempting to take her head. Sparks burnt her cheeks. But even when she finally, after more than a few seconds, reversed course, pushing back and turning her retreat into a stalemate, Ryuko wasn't focusing on something as trivial as overpowering the assassin.

No, her heart was focused on *what* the bastard was wearing.

"You goddamn son of a bitch!"

She remembered Ardyn Izunia's black coat. Every fold... every crease and seam... was etched into her memories. The pain of getting stabbed through the chest remained a fresh, bleeding wound. There were other things she couldn't remember. Such as what the smug bastard did to send her flying out of the stadium. And lying on the ground, unable to move while Mickey distracted the psychopath. But knowing this guy had the same tailor as Ardyn spurred her forward, pushing those memories into the deepest corner of her mind! With both hands twisting around the Scissor Blade's handle, she snarled, pushing everything - and then some - into the goal of shattering the bastard's stupid weapons.

Only for the guy to somehow free one of his arms.

Damn it!

Thinking quickly on the spot, relying solely upon past experiences and battles, Ryuko didn't hesitate to smash her forehead against the asshole's face.

"Don't screw with me!!!"

The underhanded blow worked perfectly. Just as planned. As her forehead connected with an ear-wrenching crunch, the bastard's head snapped backwards. At the same time, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Jecht sprinting towards them, flames spiraling around his sword. And then promptly *gagged* when the cloaked asshole pushed her away, his hand burying itself into the depths of her stomach. Yet despite nearly being swept off her feet by the guy's preposterous strength, Ryuko latched onto his shoulder, fingers clenching the fabric of his stupid coat, and forced him to face the oncoming, extremely angry reigning champion.

Who broke through both ethereal blades with an overhanded swing.

"HAH!!!"

A distant ticking echoed within the displaced depths of the cloaked figure's heart.

And time *stopped*.

Poised with one boot just off the ground, the mysterious figure remained frozen. A statue in suspended reality. And then time for them and them alone began rewinding. The deep wound across their chest regenerated. The damage to their black coat disappeared one stitch at a time. They spun around. One foot, and then the other, reversing course. The shattered remnants of their ethereal blades flickered, desynchronized from the time stream, before returning to their untarnished condition.

All while Ryuko and Jecht remained frozen, unable to move, let alone comprehend what was happening.

Their foot pivoted against the stands as time resumed course in the appropriate direction... solely for themselves.

Only for an armored hand to *clamp* around their face.

“GO TO HELL!!!”

The Firaga erupted point-blank against the mysterious figure without warning. Torrents of fire and smoke exploded across the coliseum. Super-heated flames licked Ryuko's hand when the backlash of doing something so goddamn stupid sent the mute bastard crashing through one pillar after another. She watched, grinning slightly, as the asshole smashed through solid rock and marble. Even with the burns covering the left side of her face, red marks that were already fading, using something so exhausting - no, scratch that - something that *should've* been exhausting didn't drain her energy. Not in the slightest.

And with a snarl, she pushed off the stands, chasing after the cloaked bastard.

Clang!

Sweat dripped down her chin as the Scissor Blade slammed against the ethereal swords.

Clang! Clang!

Her next two slashes accomplished nothing. They didn't leave so much as a scratch. But it was enough to force the asshole backwards. He landed on the ground first, right in the middle of the arena. One boot tapping against cracked stone before darting to the right, avoiding the Scissor Blade by the skin of his teeth. With her knee pressing against the floor, Ryuko spat onto the ground before immediately pursuing the guy. She bounced onto her feet, closing the distance between them just as both ethereal blades swung downwards.

CLANG!!!

Holding onto the Scissor Blade with both hands, sweaty palms latched onto hardened Life Fibers, Ryuko sliced against the first ethereal sword. The razor-sharp edge of her dad's sword clashed against the bastard's magical weapon. It wasn't enough to shatter it. Not like Jecht. But it *did* force the guy's arm upwards, breaking through his guard. And a subsequent knee to the wrist - copying Jecht's technique right down to the grunt - forced the other sword out of his hand. Snarling in the back of her throat, she lurched forward, Scissor Blade stabbing towards the bastard's heart.

Everything shifted.

And he was *gone*.

"Oh no you don't!"

A restrained curse sat upon the tip of her tongue when the mysterious asshole reappeared out of thin air. Not caring in the slightest *how* the bastard was teleporting, Ryuko pivoted upon her left foot, sneaker dragging against the ground. Sweat dripped down her face as she ducked underneath the ethereal blade before countering, only for the cloaked bastard to somehow *slide* sideways. He moved out of the way, allowing the Scissor Blade to pass between his arm and chest without so much as a tear on his black coat.

Then her breath hitched when his other hand grabbed something out of nothingness and darkness.

"Shit!"

She leapt backwards before the word finished leaving her throat. Her sneakers left the ground, skipping above the arena as the pair of ethereal blades combined into a spear, missing her heart by the smallest fraction.

“Frickin’ asshole.”

Ryuko ignored the heavy beating of her heart at the near miss. Frustration pulled at the corners of her mouth as she scoffed, rubbing the back of her hand against her bloodied chin just as Jecht leapt out of the stands. And with a snort, her grip around the Scissor Blade tightened. She snapped her other hand around the handle, hefting the hardened Life Fiber weapon in front of her body. Her shoulders stiffened, blood still oozing from the large gash on her forehead. And then she chanced a quick glance at Jecht, only for guilt to immediately stab itself deep into the depths of her heart.

The guy was pissed. No, what she saw in his eyes was a lot worse than anger. Jecht wanted the cloaked asshole *dead*.

It was a familiar expression.

Rolling her tongue along the contours of her mouth, she spat out a large wad of blood onto the ground. She licked the corner of her lips when the bastard pulled his arms apart, separating the spear into its original components, leaving him holding a pair of identical ethereal swords. But she wasn’t thinking about the stupid display of skill. No, she was trying to understand what the hell happened. Something strange was going on. One moment she watched Jecht slice through the bastard. And then next she felt a weird and messed-up sensation deep in her heart.

Right before the cloaked asshole reappeared nearby, good as freaking new!

Not just once, but twice!

With a metallic *keening*, Ryuko hefted the Scissor Blade, eyes trained on the bastard’s concealed face, “Who the hell are you!?”

“Nobody of importance.”

Her mouth twitched at the dismissive answer. Snarling derisively, she pointed the Scissor Blade squarely between the asshole's eyes, "Bullshit! You workin' for Ardyn? What does he want with Auron!?"

"It's said that, on this day, Master Braska's former guardian perished at the hands of an unknown assailant."

The cloaked figure motioned towards Auron, who was still alive, albeit barely, before aiming one ethereal blades at Jecht, "And his companion, a man who desperately sought his way home, experienced a similar tragic fate soon after."

"Cocky little bastard."

Jecht hefted Seafang onto his shoulder, brushing aside the umpteenth threat against his life, "You think you can attack Auron, attack *me* and talk like an old man and get away with it?"

An awkward pause clung to the air. It pierced Ryuko's heart. Yet the mysterious strange exhibited not a modicum of concern as they raised their arms, fingers tightly clasping the twin blades, "So easily you believe yourself capable of rejecting fate. The future cannot be changed. What you want..."

They vanished in a flicker of darkness before reappearing in front of Jecht, "... and what will happen..."

Another unseen movement desynchronized the cloaked figure from reality, allowing them to avoid Seafang by the slightest flutter of their black coat. With the soft *crunch* of boots upon the ground, they rematerialized into existence behind Jecht, ethereal blades aimed towards the reigning champion's heart, "... are irrevocable."

"Screw that!"

Ryuko *still* had no idea how the bastard was teleporting.

But she didn't care!

Before the arrogant, smug and annoying-as-freaking-hell son of a bitch reappeared behind Jecht, she was already waiting for him. Her sneakers slipped against the ground, burned soles skidding for purchases. The Scissor Blade contorted within her fingers, transforming into Decapitation Mode amidst the familiar sound of shifting Life Fibers. Sure, maybe she couldn't understand how the freak was teleporting. But she *damn* well felt the slightest twitch of darkness whenever he vanished. And that weird and messed up sensation shouted loud and clear in her heart. It was enough to get a good bead on the bastard whenever he blinked in and out of reality.

Which was why, right before he faded back into existence, the Scissor Blade was already swinging at his throat.

Clang!

An ethereal sword, glowing brighter than she remembered, somehow intercepted the Scissor Blade. Gnashing her teeth at the bastard's preposterous strength when she suddenly stopped dead, arms trembling and muscles spasming, Ryuko reached deep into her heart. She dredged up every last scrap of power before throwing herself forward, shoulder tackling the cloaked bastard. One of his ethereal swords scraped against her shoulder, spraying blood through the air. The other swung downwards, stopping only when she grabbed the son of a bitch's left wrist hard enough that she *knew* he felt it.

The Scissor Blade felt heavy as she pulled the bastard off-balance. She drove her foot into his knee, sweeping out his legs. And when he fell sideways, unable to dodge, she swung with all her power.

Only for the bastard to disappear.

"What in the -"

Her question devolved into a strangled gasp when something snapped her legs together.

There was a brief moment - between something pulling her legs backwards and her face smashing into the ground - when she cursed. And then *pain* blossomed as her nose encountered solid rock. A grunt escaped her lips as specks of blood dripping onto the ground while trailing down her chin. Spitting out the bitter taste of copper from her mouth, Ryuko glanced over her shoulder at the orange-red lasso burning her ankles before she was *yanked* backwards.

And then straight into the air.

“God damn shit!”

Without bothering to contemplate whether it was possible - or hell, even safe - Ryuko twisted sideways. She flipped the Scissor Blade into a reverse grip, hardened Life Fibers rubbing against her fingers. She waited until the last possible moment, when the asshole reared one of the ethereal swords over his head, before slicing through the lasso.

Earning the barest trace of surprise from the bastard.

“I couldn’t care LESS about the future!”

She snapped her wrist, Threadcutter materialized from the depths of her heart alongside a twinkling burst of crimson stars. And that, more than anything, appeared to startle the cloaked asshole. He teleported as she swung both Keyblade and Scissor Blade crosswise in front of her body, reappearing on top of the coliseum while she landed back on the ground, “Or any other stupid time bullshit!”

Blood dripped from her nose as she landed on the ground, “So either shut the hell up or start making some god damn sense!”

“By choice or chance, you cannot control what you are not aware of.”

From his perch upon the coliseum, darkness oozing from his heart, the mysterious figure swept an arm lengthwise through the air,

“Although your interference was unexpected, as was your bearing of the Keyblade, you’ve accomplished nothing. Fate cannot be changed. Destiny cannot be altered, no matter how much one may struggle. Despite your efforts, Auron and Jecht are destined to die this day. Nothing can change that fact. In the end, you’ve simply delayed the inevitable.”

“Tch! Pretty big talk comin’ from a punk-ass bitch too scared to fight!”

Ryuko scoffed, “If you’re so freaking confident the future can’t be changed, why don’t you come down and say that to my face?”

Threadcutter’s keychain jingled as the corners of her mouth curled into a vicious, shit-eating grin, “Or did me messing with your fancy little technique make you wet your pants?”

The mysterious figure refused to acknowledge the question. They merely craned their head downwards, observing the teenager with reluctant patience. Striking down Jecht and Auron was permitted by the laws of time. They were destined to perish this day at the hands of an unknown stranger, one who vanished into the darkness, their identity never discovered. This girl, on the other hand, was unexpected. Her interference unwanted. It would easy - or rather, trivial - ending her existence. However, the same rules which granted him leeway to travel forward through time prevented such major changes.

Yet that wasn’t what caught his attention.

It was imperceptible to those unattuned. Even his most future self, permitted the opportunity to observe the teenager, might inadvertently overlook such things. Even himself, standing at odds with the unexpected bearer of the Keyblade, would have remained blind if not for her childish belligerence. For it was her growing frustration, simmering hatred and intensifying disdain at his existence... at his decision to accept the immutable nature of one’s destiny... which allowed him to briefly sense the darkness within her

heart. And that interaction, fleeting and ephemeral, had been overwhelming.

Not from its unexpected depth. Nor the peculiarity of a Keyblade Master, other than his future self, accepting a pupil bearing such latent darkness in their heart.

No, it was the tainted light congruent to the darkness.

Something which gave him pause.

“I see...”

He stepped backwards, the sole of his boot dragging against the coliseum. Reality warped around his body as he desynchronized with the flow of time. Darkness clung to his body while the surrounding reality twisted into afterimages and fading imprints, each of which grew dimmer and more transparent by the second.

“Hey! Get back here!”

Ryuko scrambled up the coliseum. Her sneakers slipped against cracked marble. And before she was halfway to the roof, she crossed Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade in front of her face. With one final step, almost slipping on the edge of the roof, she lurched forward, slicing through the mysterious bastard. But she was too late. The blades phased through his body like he was a freaking ghost! Having *nothing* to hit sent her stumbling through his transparent form, her right shoulder slamming into the roof before she rolled back onto her feet.

Giving her enough time to watch the asshole finish fading into nothingness.

“Damn it!”

The blistering sun beat against the back of her neck as she glanced back and forth. Where the hell did the bastard go? That wasn’t

teleportation! And she was *damn* sure he didn't open a Corridor of Darkness.

"You kill him?"

Jecht's question pierced through the frustration simmering in the depths of her heart. Biting the inside of her cheek, she quickly brought her trembling fingers under control. She took a deep breath and pushed away the unnecessary anger. Glancing one final time over her shoulder, sweeping the surrounding buildings for any trace of darkness, Ryuko took one step and leapt off the roof.

"No, he got away..."

The answer emerged as a struggling, self-loathing whisper, "... sorry."

"It's not your fault."

Jecht was careful... he was goddamn freaking careful... propping Auron onto his shoulder. His own injuries aside, like *hell* was he going to leave his friend lying around. Not if he could help it. Not if he had a choice. He winced as every awkward step sent bursts of agony lancing through his shoulder. Blood, not just his own, dripped down his back. And his nose, maybe a little broken, was beginning to hurt. But he didn't complain. Not once. Auron was a stick in the mud. The guy's mugshot was in the dictionary next to 'boring' and 'dull.' But he was still his goddamn friend. One of the only people he'd offer to buy a drink.

Which made his stomach drop at seeing the guy covered in more wounds than he could count.

Because there wasn't anything *he* could do to help Auron.

"Hey... uh... Ryuko..."

It took a few seconds, but Jecht managed to carefully lean Auron against the wall, “You... uh... wouldn’t happen to know healing magic, would ya?”

To Ryuko, the question was like Beatrix punching her in the face.

Hard.

She tossed the Scissor Blade onto the ground without a single word.

The weapon clattered against her foot before spinning away. But the moment it left her fingers, she hefted Threadcutter over her head. With the taste of copper filling her mouth, Ryuko grasped the Keyblade. She focused on the comforting sensation quickly filling her heart. The dream of wanting nothing more than helping Auron. A phantasmal breeze rushed through the coliseum, rustling her hair. Streams of emerald magic spiraled around Threadcutter as a word, a single phrase, escaped her lips.

“HEAL!!!”

It wasn’t fast, not by any stretch of the word. She wasn’t exactly *good* at restoration magic. But to her relief, Auron’s breathing quickly stabilized. And with another Cura, what remained of his wounds slowly healed, leaving the guy nowhere close to death’s door. Letting out a relieved sigh, Ryuko lowered her arms, Threadcutter softly clattering against the ground. She breathed deeply, eyes closed and heart racing, before pointing the Keyblade towards Jecht, another stream of emerald magic encircling her arm. It was harder... a lot harder than helping Auron... but Ryuko decided to heal the half-naked exhibition’s injuries.

Just to stop him from asking.

“Uh... thanks.”

Jecht traced the newest scar adorning his rugged physique before awkwardly clearing his throat, “I guess this makes us even.”

“Whatever.”

Ryuko propped the front of her sneaker underneath the Scissor Blade before launching the hardened Life Fiber weapon into the air. It spun in front of her face. And a moment later, she curled her fingers around the handle. She didn't know what was worse. Jecht's insults or the half-assed, backhanded compliment. They both *sucked*. The asshole didn't even know how to apologize! But just this once, considering all the shit that just happened, she was gonna let it slide.

Rolling her neck until the joints *popped*, she sighed deeply before motioning towards Auron, who'd regained consciousness when they weren't looking, “Hey, you gonna be alright?”

“I'm fine.”

Auron politely brushed aside Jecht when the man attempted, in his own awkward fashion, to help. Holding onto the wall for balance, he pushed himself onto his feet, unbothered by the phantasmal pain lingering within his heart. He rolled his shoulders, loosening the stiff muscles as memories of his somewhat one-sided confrontation with the cloaked man returned to the forefront of his mind. And then his single eye narrowed, slightly enough to avoid notice, at Ryuko's peculiar choice of weapon, “You have a Keyblade.”

A grumble reminiscent of subdued interest lingered in the back of his throat, “If it's not too much, who was your Master?”

The question threw Ryuko off her game. This guy knew about the Keyblade? It was suspicious... until she remembered something the cloaked bastard mentioned. A phrase most people wouldn't understand. He wanted to know? Alright, that was fine with her, “Beatrix taught me everything I know about the Keyblade.”

Keychain jingling and materialized metal *singing*, she hefted Threadcutter in front of her chest, “Now answer *my* question! How do you know about the Keyblade?”

“Humph.”

The dismissive scoff rolled off Auron’s tongue, “While I never had the honor of meeting her myself, Braska spoke highly of Beatrix. Her dedication to preserving the balance between light and darkness is commendable.”

“Hold on a damn second!”

Jecht interjected himself into the conversation, betrayal evident in his tone, “What’s a Keyblade? And why the hell didn’t you tell *me* any of this?”

A quirked eyebrow was the former guardian’s response, “You never asked.”

Although his friend inundated him with questions about Braska, the Keyblade and several other things, Auron shrugged his shoulders. Beatrix’s reputation as a formidable paladin was well-deserved if her student was this capable. Although, if he was being honest, Ryuko’s personality was frighteningly similar to Jecht’s, right down to the crass language. A flicker of amusement made itself known. Something that, unfortunately, faded upon nonchalantly asking, “You’re Ryuko, correct?”

Ryuko blinked at the weird phrasing, “Uh... yeah?”

“Three weeks ago, give or take a few days, a young woman around your age arrived in town. She claimed to be searching for someone,” Auron propped the damaged zanbatou against his shoulder despite the mounting tension, “Someone bearing your name.”

An ember ignited within Ryuko’s heart.

“Did she say anything!?”

She could barely breathe. Her heart pounded angrily against her chest. Hades might have *hinted* knowing something about Satsuki.

But this guy - Auron - claimed to have met someone who knew her freaking name. And without another thought, Ryuko tossed Threadcutter aside, the Keyblade dissipating into motes of crimson light, and grabbed the former guardian by his haori, "Like where she was going and stuff?"

"I'm afraid not."

Auron was nonplussed despite Ryuko's vice-like grip, "She only mentioned your name in passing. But from her tone, I'd guess she was wandering from world to world. I suggested she search Radiant Garden for information. It's possible she took my advice."

Ryuko didn't know what to believe.

How could Satsuki travel between worlds without a Keyblade? It wasn't like her sister would have trouble proving herself worthy. But that couldn't be right. Yen Sid would have said something if another Keyblade Master took Satsuki as their student. The answer - the truth - was obvious. It was staring her in the face. It stabbed painfully at her heart. Her lips opened and closed. And then, with a scoff, she pushed those thoughts to the deepest corner of her mind. No matter the method, even if she wasn't gonna like it, how Satsuki was traveling from world to world wasn't important.

Because for the first time in forever, hope blossomed in the depths of her heart.

"... thanks."

She appreciated Auron's help. And not just because she no longer had to find Hades, who was probably bullshitting about knowing anything about Satsuki. But if her sister took Auron's advice, she couldn't afford shooting the breeze. Waving over her shoulder at the former guardian, Ryuko promptly pivoted on her heel, destination firmly in mind. But before she could take another step - or hell, summon her Keyblade Armor - Jecht cleared his throat, loudly and obnoxiously.

“Ryuko, ya mind doing me a favor?”

Looking over her shoulder, Ryuko blinked, the Scissor Blade absentmindedly collapsing around her thumb, “Huh?”

“Look... uh... since you have the Keyblade and all...”

Despite being the perfect representation of masculinity - arms folded across his chest, jagged scars crisscrossing his body, calloused fingers holding biceps bigger than her legs - Jecht grumbled under his breath. And after several seconds, decided to blurt out what he wanted to say, “Ya mind swinging over to Destiny Islands? Everyone’s probably worried sick about me. So, can ya tell them I’m comin’ home? Oh, and make sure Tidus - ya know, my son - is eating all right. Don’t want my boy being all skin and bones. It’ll ruin my reputation.”

“Sure, if I have time.”

It sounded rude as hell. And yeah, if Mako was around, she’d ask her to apologize. But Ryuko *knew* that was exactly what Jecht wanted to hear. Shrugging her shoulders when the half-naked bastard didn’t answer, she lazily saluted before adding, “And don’t worry about that asshole! I’m gonna make him pay for everything!”

“Like hell you are!”

Under most circumstances, Jecht considered himself a fairly generous guy. He was polite. Magnanimous. Hell, most ladies called him a respectful. But this? Nah, there was not a chance he was gonna let *this* slide off his shoulders, “Keyblade or not, he ain’t your problem! If anyone’s taking down that snot-nosed brat, it’s gonna be me!”

“I’d like to see you stop me!”

The right side of Ryuko’s face twitched as the concept of being nice to Jecht - hell, treating him with something close to respect - went

sailing over the nearest wall, "That bastard and every freak wearing that stupid black coat's my problem! Got it!? Oh, and by the way, why don't you learn some manners? You should be a little more grateful after I saved your lives!"

As the argument escalated, threatening to devolve into a physical confrontation, Auron wearily closed his eye.

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Chapter 6.1

*Some time ago, I mentioned how most mages are capable of casting three tiers of elemental magic (or magic in general). Fire, Fira and Firaga, for example. An adequate practitioner of magic could, with enough imagination and training, apply specific spells to physical techniques. Such as Fire Raid. An *exceptional* mage could reach into the depths of their hearts, summoning the ability to cast the fourth tier of a spell. For this example, Firaja. And only the strongest, most powerful mages - wizards, sorceresses and sorcerers, black mages and the most experienced Keyblade Masters - can boost the fourth tier into something utterly devastating. Something that takes years of training and practice for the most competent, the most gifted, users of magic to master.*

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 6 - Don't Stop Believin'

"It's been a while... Braska."

The gravestone was little more than a marble plaque, a single name etched onto the untarnished surface.

"I thought seeing you would be too much."

A breeze carrying the familiar smell of ocean water whispered on the wind. Waves of soft grass danced around the grave as the sun peaked through the clouds. Birds and insects chirped in the distance. A fly momentarily buzzed around her face, deterred from landing by the faintest application of magic. And clasped in her left arm, reminiscent of a knight bearing sword and shield, the stuffed doll remained unmoving and lifeless as Lulu smiled, a somber and strained expression, "Irony, isn't it? An apprentice of Merlin too afraid of visiting her friend's grave."

Lulu paused.

For several minutes, perhaps even longer, she didn't speak.

Long before she earned the right to call herself a sorceress, a position which carried far more weight and responsibility than Keyblade Master, she'd met Braska. An accidental encounter in the streets of Luca. It hadn't bore any significance at the time. She wasn't taken under Braska's wing. He didn't sense potential in her heart. It had been nothing more than a friendly display of childish magic.

Yet it had filled her young heart with intense hope.

And that hope, kindled by the kindness of a Keyblade Master returning home for the first time since embarking underneath the wings of his Master, had spurred her forward. From that otherwise childish show of special effects, something trivial to even the most novice mage, she sought everything available on magic. She scrounged the libraries for books. She learned the ancient languages. Through nothing more than studying until her heart quivered... day after day, week after week, month after month... she mastered the basic spells. Until there was nothing left on the world to learn.

Only for one day, deep into the coldest winter in memory, Merlin flew through the library's window alongside confetti, streams of light and magic. All the while wearing a bathing suit and snorkeling goggles.

Something she believed, but could never prove, was Braska's doing.

"There's so much I wish I could have told you."

She could never forget Braska's final words. His pleasant smile as they drank in Merlin's, at the time, current house had been exceedingly happy. Even Auron, always bound to complain about foregoing their duties as defenders of the Realm of Light for such trivial amusements, had relaxed. If only barely. The memory still

brought a smile to her face. And at the end of the night, as they walked out the door never to return, Braska had turned around, saluted a tipsy Merlin, and spoke, for the umpteenth time, the words *she* lived by.

No matter how dark the night, morning always comes, and our journey begins anew.

The beaded braids dangling from the six ornamental pins in her hair jingled as she tilted her head back and stared into the cloudy skies, "Yuna's doing fine. She's already going around proclaiming herself the next coming of Merlin."

Her black gown folded as she knelt upon the grass in front of the grave. Two years. It had been more than two years since Braska and Auron's death. And she still knew next to nothing about what happened. Even seeking counsel from the stars alongside Merlin and Yen Sid proved inadequate in discerning their assassin's identity. They couldn't even look into the past to see how Braska and Auron were defeated.

It was one failure after another.

Crimson eyes settled upon the rusted Keyblade standing above the grave, a lifeless husk of its former self, "Of course, even *I* wouldn't say something so outrageous. But it's like Merlin always says. The hopes and dreams of children are the guiding light into the future. Yuna's magical talent is impressive. It cannot be ignored. Almost eight years old and she can already cast basic spells without becoming winded. She'll be a full-fledged mage long before she stops scraping her knees on the playground."

The breeze picked up, rushed through the grassy fields.

And with both hands clasped together, stuffed doll sitting on her legs, Lulu's voice lowered to a whisper.

“But when she’s a little older... after she’s had time to grow up... I want Yuna to become my apprentice.”

An awkward pause followed the admittance as she forcibly stopped that train of thought. Guilt flushed through her heart. The knight-like plushie shifted against her arm. And with some reluctance, Lulu restarted the conversation, “You remember telling me about Beatrix? How the Heartless would invade the Realm of Light long before she found someone able to meet her standards? Well, she’s found a student - Ryuko. It’s quite the strange name, I’ll admit. But the girl’s strength cannot be ignored. Nor can the resilience of her heart.”

Lulu afforded herself a somber chuckle, “Anyone capable of standing against a monster like Ardyn Lucis Caelum deserves -”

A flash of darkness whispered against her heart.

And the children’s doll clasped in her left arm *twitched*.

“Humph.”

Not a trace of dirt blemished her clothing as she stood up. The interlocked belts barely moving. The hem of her gown was immaculate. The décolletage dust-free. And with indignation staining her heart, Lulu glanced over her shoulder at the creatures pulling themselves from darkness. They were a myriad of misshapen, pitiful monsters, each bearing identical insignia somewhere upon their bodies. Some were small and lean. Others bulbous, fat and possessing extraordinary physical fortitude. Some had razor-sharp claws. And yet still others slithered along the ground.

They were negative emotions manifested through darkness into the Realm of Light.

And yet none earned her sympathy.

As her disinterested gaze settled upon multiple autonomous suits of floating silver armor, each much larger than herself, some of whom

held swords, Lulu focused on the single creature standing at the army's forefront. An Unversed guised as a scholar, an obnoxiously large tome clasped within its clawed fingers.

"You couldn't have waited until I was finished?"

Her question went unanswered, not that she expected the creature to respond.

Instead of contemplating something so trivially simple, the scholarly Unversed's massive tome snapped open. Page after page fluttered heedless of the wind. An eyebrow quirked at the darkness lurking within the heavily inked paper. One of her fingers twitched at the amusement seeming to cling to the monster's existence. And ruby eyes narrowed sharply, annoyance noticeable on her pursed lips, when several pages exploded out of the book before forming into identical copies of herself. Each perfect down to the interlocked belts crisscrossing over the front of her gown.

All of whom immediately unleashed multiple instances of Thundara and Thundaga without so much as a warning.

The atmosphere electrified beneath the barrage of thunder magic. Thick bolts of crackling lightning struck Lulu's position, setting the field around Braska's grave ablaze. His Keyblade and marble gravestone disappeared within the copious amount of dust and smoke kicked into the air. Embers sizzled when the grass combusted beneath the deluge of magic, filling the air with noxious odors. And the Unversed, each possessing rudimentary emotions, convulsed with something akin to triumph.

"Isn't it a little premature to celebrate just yet?"

Lulu couldn't help herself. Sarcasm was second-nature. And yet, anger simmered underneath the surface, lurking within the depths of her heart, "How disappointing."

As the dust settled, the translucent barrier enveloping Braska's grave and the surrounding field, shimmered with a brilliant sapphire hue. Standing at the epicenter of the spell, one arm raised over her head, uninjured despite the previous salvo of powerful thunder magic, the black mage's lips contorted into a frown. She said nothing - uttered *nothing* - while counting each and every Unversed that dared sully Braska's resting place with their unwanted presence. Her hand barely twitched when the clones launched another barrage of darkness-tainted lightning.

Yet it wasn't enough to garner a *modicum* of her attention.

"It appears your mimicry is far from perfect."

With a careful swish of her index finger, the barrier's magical properties changed. Something noticeable from the nearly imperceptible shift in the sapphire coloration. A transformation only the most experienced specialists of magic could hope to recognize, let alone understand.

"Then again..."

She sauntered through the barrier when the imperfect clones were struck by their own reflected magic, ["... what can one expect from creatures born of darkness?"](#)

A snap of her fingers severed the scholarly Unversed's ability to use magic. Red hook-like eyes seemingly widened when nothing, not a clone or anything else, materialized from within the massive tome grasped in its clawed. And upon witnessing the otherwise human *fear*, Lulu spread her arms, allowing the knight-like plushie to fall onto the ground with an adorable *plop* as infinite possibilities and unbridled dreams manifested from the swelling light of her heart.

"Now, allow me to demonstrate the *proper* application of thunder magic."

Lightning crackled around her manicured fingers as she reached towards the heavens.

A motion mimicked perfectly by the suddenly animated children's doll.

Curling two fingers until they rested against the palm of her hand, Lulu smirked as magic materialized in the purest definition of the word. In the blink of an eye, as the concept of thunder swirled alongside the eddies of her consciousness, thunderclouds formed overhead. The sunny afternoon turned dark and bitterly cold. The breeze blowing off the sea transformed into a raging maelstrom. The grassy field danced chaotically, whipped around by the ominous gales. And as every Unversed - from the autonomous floating suits of armor to the mimicking scholar - attacked, launching spells and physical techniques possessing more than their fair share of darkness, she snapped her fingers once more.

"Shock."

There was another clap of thunder.

Droplets of rain pelted the ground.

And the Unversed *vanished* within an overwhelming explosion of lightning.

Her fingers barely finished snapping when the ground surrounding the barrier and Braska's grave disintegrated. Pillars of rock... chunks of dirt... burning grass... the environment broke beneath the powerful, seemingly unending application of the purest thunder magic. Gravity momentarily inverted itself. Electricity streamed along the ground, electrocuting everything within range. An ear-deafening *whump* whispered against her protected ears when the lightning began *swirling* around the Unversed, wrapping them within its deadly embrace. The doll copying her movements covered its face, protected unaffected eyes from the subsequent eruption visible beyond the horizon.

And it tumbled backwards, hitting Lulu's leg when the shockwave, displaced air rapidly filling the newly-created void, ricocheted backwards.

"Hmm... perhaps I overdid it."

Sauntering away from Braska's grave as the reflective barrier dissipated into shattering motes of iridescent magic, Lulu didn't resist when the plush doll leapt back into her arms, "But it appears something wishes to kill me."

Her eyes swept across the field. Or rather, what remained of the once peaceful and tranquil grassy plains. Lingered traces of thunder magic clung to existence. Without proper diligence and a steady hand, innocent people would experience minor, barely painful shocks if they so much as approached Braska's grave. Twinkling streams of magic encircled her wrist. Colors known and unknown swirled around her fingers. And with a flourish that would make Merlin extremely proud, all evidence of the battle vanished, leaving the simple grave surrounded by fields of healthy and thriving grass.

"I suppose this means visiting Yen Sid is in order."

Sighing at the admittance, Lulu pressed a finger against her nose. Magic gathered upon the extended digit, invisible yet possessing a mystical glow. One that enraptured the senses. The energy radiated from her heart. And without a sound, leaving nothing behind but the faint *whish* of air replacing her presence, she vanished from the world.

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Chapter 6.2

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/2/2b/Ryuko_arrives_at_the_academy.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20150331042224]

“Come back any time, kupo!”

“Yeah, sure.”

Ryuko sauntered out of Mog’s Shop, halfheartedly waving over her shoulder at the Moogles standing on the counter. Bracing herself against the chilly summer evening, she cracked her knuckles, rolled her neck and yawned.

“Ugh...”

It had taken Mog more than three hours to retailor her clothes. *And* get the blood out of the fabric. That was three hours she wasn’t gonna get back. Time she could have spent searching for Satsuki! But with less of a resigned grumble and more of a defeated curse, Ryuko dragged herself away from the Moogles’ shop. There was a growing chill in the air, something all but certainly unrelated to her mood. The setting sun peaked behind Hollow Bastion looming over the rest of Radiant Garden, sending deepening shafts of orange, red and purple filtering across the twilight skies.

And she snorted.

“Alright...”

The joints in her neck popped one by one. Craning her head backwards, she stared at the strange castle looming over Radiant Garden. So, that was Hollow Bastion, huh? She’d seen the castle from the moment she arrived. It stuck out like a sore thumb. But now that she had an opportunity to look at it... instead of worrying about

getting arrested for public indecency or something... Ryuko was severely underwhelmed. She'd expected something more along the lines of Lindblum's Grand Castle. A big-ass castle reaching into the clouds. Something that would take *days* to walk around. Not this.

"... time to start looking."

Punching one hand against the other, Ryuko smirked. Now that she was socially acceptable, there was nothing standing in her way. She could finally start looking for Satsuki. But there was one small problem. Something that caused her grin to falter.

Where the hell would she start?

An annoyed grumble originated in the back of her throat. It pushed its way out her mouth. And with a *smack*, Ryuko rubbed her forehead, attempting to ignore the headache threatening to ruin everything. There was no freaking way she could ask every random person if they'd seen Satsuki. There had to be hundreds - maybe even thousands - of people living on Radiant Garden. The world was the size of a large town. It was going to take *forever* covering a single neighborhood, let alone the entire freaking world.

Time she could spend actually *looking* for Satsuki.

"... damn it."

Great. Just freaking great! Her original plan was shot to hell before she managed to start asking questions! Slouching forward, grumbling for the third time in so many minutes, Ryuko lazily plodded down the street. With no direction in mind, her thoughts began wandering. God damn it, she was an idiot! Why would talking to random people bring her closer to finding Satsuki? She didn't even know if her sister took Auron's advice in the first place. For all she knew, Satsuki was halfway across the Realm of Light, making this a complete waste of her time.

Or maybe it wasn't.

Satsuki wasn't the sort of person to ignore advice. If she knew her sister - and after everything that happened, she *damn well* did - Satsuki took Auron's suggestion and came to Radiant Garden. There wasn't the slightest doubt in her heart about that. Only one major problem. Unless Satsuki did something ridiculously out of the ordinary yet totally expected... something like overthrowing the world's ruler... asking random people for information would accomplish less than forcing Mako into wearing fancy clothes. No, her big sis was smart. She wouldn't waste time.

No, she'd head straight for the person in charge.

"Tch! Guess that settles it."

With renewed confidence, Ryuko began the long trek towards Hollow Bastion. She walked through the crowds of people in the street, effortlessly dodging the groups of younger teens mock-fighting with plastic weapons. Her brow furrowed into a bored scowl when the sun disappeared behind the castle, stretching the darkening shadows. And as streetlights flickered into life, casting shafts of hazy orange across the cobblestone road, she bit the corner of her cheek. There was a single thought that refused to go away. Even if Satsuki came to Radiant Garden like Auron suggested, that was almost three weeks ago.

More than enough time for Satsuki to look around and move on, bringing her right back to square one.

"... shit!"

Ryuko punched the nearest wall. The weathered brickwork made her knuckle sting, but she couldn't care less. After coming this goddamn far... fighting tooth and nail every step of the goddamn way... finally getting proof Satsuki survived what happened to their world... only to be too late? It wasn't fair! This wasn't supposed to happen! Blood trickled down her hand as she gnashed her teeth. A drop of crimson settled onto her fingertips before vanishing into her skin, reabsorbed when the relatively minor abrasion repaired itself. Taking a

shuddering breath, snorting between clenched teeth, Ryuko glared at Hollow Bastion.

And with a strained curse, she marched towards the castle, both hands jammed into her jacket. Maybe it was a bit selfish - shit, if Satsuki was around, she'd shout about stupid she was acting - but more than anything, she wished Vanitas would show his ugly face.

Just so she could smash it into a bloody -

"Ach, I canna believe me own eyes. The lass was actually right."

Scrooge couldn't believe his stroke of luck. No, what transpired was the furthest thing from luck. Just good, old-fashioned business.

As he counted the thick bundle of Gil one bill at a time, the self-proclaimed richest person upon every world observed the dozens of paying customers mingling throughout his business with a discerning eye. Despite that rambunctious rascal with the brightest red hair imaginable nearly bowling him over and then having the *nerve* to not apologize, he was immensely satisfied. And with particularly good reason. The first day of business... his advertised grand opening... and happy customers as far as the eye could see. And more importantly, profits were already two hundred percent greater than initial expectations.

In a more private setting, he'd be bouncing off the walls with joy, shouting loudly for nobody to hear.

"Ah, 'tis a shame she refused me offer."

Wit as sharp as a tack. The ruthlessness to succeed at any cost. A stone-cold poker face chiseled from granite. And the smarts to crush one's competition without regret. The lass might not have confessed her particular mannerisms, but he wasn't hatched yesterday. There were *decades* of experience under his belt. He'd risked life and limb on more adventures dealing with nefarious villains desiring his hard-earned fortune, magical artifacts or some combination of both than

there were worlds. It wasn't easy pulled the wool over his eyes! He was the great Scrooge McDuck! He could take one look at a business, no matter how big or small, and know its profit margin, right down the Gil spent on pest control.

Which made the lass's polite refusal of his offer somewhat disappointing.

"I would have appreciated such intelligent company."

He tucked the Gil into his jacket before thumping a finger against his top hat. The morning still felt like a surreal memory. To think he would stumble across such a well-mannered lass with considerable business acumen. It was a chance encounter. Nothing more than happenstance. And yet, while mulling various pieces of real estate, the lass provided a reasoned and well-argued justification for why *this* location would maximum his profits and minimize costs and property taxes. Sure, he would have *eventually* settled on this location. It was one of his top five. But it was improbable - nay, impossible - for anyone, no matter how smart or tough, to speak with such experience.

It was nothing more than a hunch, but he was confident the lass was heiress to a highly profitable business.

Perhaps even a conglomerate.

"Ach, but who the devil carries around half a giant scissor?"

Mumbling despondently, the wealthy businessman tapped the gold-tipped cane between his feet, "The lass's liable to poke someone's eye out with that thing!"

On the other side of the street, Ryuko's thoughts came to a screeching halt.

"... what?"

For an inescapably long and agonizing moment, Ryuko thought she was hearing nonsense. What were the damn odds she'd randomly walk by someone talking about Satsuki? Stuff like that only happened in movies! Grimacing until her lower lip was drawn into her mouth, she took another lumbering step only to quickly find herself upon to move. She was completely paralyzed, standing in the street with both hands trembling. The taste of copper filled her mouth. A cold chill raced down her spine. No matter how much the duck sounded like he was talking about Satsuki, she was imagining things. It was impossible Satsuki spoke to this guy.

Besides, the Scissor Blades didn't look all that special. Hell, there were probably dozens of swords that looked like them.

Ryuko took another struggling step.

But what if she was wrong?

What if Satsuki actually *had* talked with this duck?

She swallowed the lump in her throat. Ryuko could feel her heart beating a mile a minute, but no matter how much she *needed* to know about Satsuki, she couldn't look desperate. She had to stay cool, act like she really didn't give a damn one way or the other. Not if she wanted to find out about Satsuki.

Taking a deep breath, Ryuko lazily sauntered towards the greedy, half-dressed duck. She stared inside the packed ice cream shop, shrugging her shoulders at the dozens of people buying all sorts of different flavors. A cold wind whipped through the streets, sending chills down her spine. And when she finally knew the duck was paying attention, even if he hadn't even looked in her general direction, nonchalantly bit the bullet, "Hey, I got a question for -"

"If you're looking for free samples, bugger off!"

Without even bothering to glance in the disrespectful teenager's general direction, let alone give her the time of day, Scrooge brushed

aside her request. And, for good measure, waved her off, "This duck ain't falling for that old trick!"

"Huh?"

Ryuko's eyebrow twitched once... then twice... at the unexpected insult, "Hey, are you even listening? That's not what I was gonna -"

"Ye pay the same price as everybody else," Scrooge stomped away, ruffled by the flagrant insult to his intelligence, "And if ye even try mentioning some made-up regulation, I'll make sure ye pay double!"

"I don't care about your stupid ice cream!"

The corner of mouth twitched alongside her eyebrow. A particularly good string of curses settled on her tongue. But with some restraint, Ryuko repeated the question while jabbing her thumb at the Scissor Blade on her back, "I was gonna ask if everything you just said was true!"

"What's it to ye?"

A strangled grunt forced its way up her throat. Snarling when the duck continued walking - or rather, waddling - away, acting like he was better than her and couldn't bother giving a damn, Ryuko bit her cheek, desperately trying to keep her temper under control, "Because it's damn important! Did she have a sword like this one? Was her name Satsuki?"

"How the devil..."

Scrooge detested eavesdroppers nearly as much as charity! They were either employees of his sworn rivals or snooping, disrespectful miscreants lacking the manners to mind their own bloody business! With an annoyed huff, he tipped his hat forward, gathered steam in his weary bones and promptly turned around, intent on confronting the impolite lass. If she wanted a piece of his mind, he was more than happy to oblige.

But his legendary temper cooled to a bubbling simmer when he finally got a good gander at the teenager. Scratching his bill, confusion and suspicion welling in his heart, he leaned just a bit closer, staring at the lass's glower to the vibrant streak of crimson over her left eye. And after more than an awkward moment, tilted his head sideways, eyes slightly narrowed, and offhandedly asked.

"Ye wouldn't happen to be Ryuko by any chance?"

Ryuko's own well-known anger dissipated at the surprising question, "Hold on! Satsuki told you about me?"

"Aye, it was quite the remarkable series of events."

His gold-tipped cane tapped against the cobblestone streets as he sauntered towards one of the newly-installed benches, purchases specifically for the grand opening, "Your sister gave me some rather valuable insight concerning me business venture. And once we finished, with a wee bit more argument than discussion, in the drop of a hat, she began asking questions about a variety of things. Including whether or not I've spoken with someone matching your description, right down to the dyed streak of hair! But I must say, ye lack Satsuki's strange yet thick eyebrows."

"Hang on a sec!"

Ryuko reached towards the single bang of crimson before shaking her head, "How the hell would Satsuki know to ask *you* anything!?"

"HA! Your sister's as sharp as a tack!"

The entrepreneur chuckled before sitting squarely in the middle of the bench. And then promptly struggled getting comfortable. Blast it! Who the devil designed benches out of wrought metal? Moving back and forth until he found the spot with proper lumbar support, Scrooge made a mental note to change contractors first thing in the morning before thrusting his cane towards Ryuko, "Right off the bat, she realized this world wasn't exactly me home! With a single speech,

she deduced me motivations! But this duck wasn't hatched yesterday! I could tell something was bothering the lass! Her questions were a bit too personal, ye see. So, after our discussion stretched to more than an hour, I pressed the issue... a bit more forcibly than necessary... until your sister explained why wanted such valuable and dangerous information."

Clack!

His gold-tipped cane slammed against the ground, "It was to find ye. So, after deliberating with myself, I told her about Merlin, the wizard who brought me here from another world."

Ryuko's breath hitched in the back of her throat.

Merlin sounded so goddamn familiar. It was on the tip of her tongue. And then it hit her. Punched her in the gut. She realized why the name rang a bell. Merlin, if the duck was talking about the same wizard, was Yen Sid's master. The guy who taught the bushy eyebrowed sorcerer everything he knew about magic. He was supposedly the greatest, most badass, magic user. Somebody who could have defeated Ragyo Kiryuin and Nui Harime without breaking a sweat.

So, why the hell didn't Merlin say anything about Satsuki?

She wasn't stupid. Not about something this freaking important. If Satsuki spoke with Merlin... and he was the same guy as Yen Sid's master and not just some random wizard with the same name... the guy should have told Yen Sid. Or better yet, told *her*. He should have teleported to Alexandria - or hell, wherever she was staying at the moment - with Satsuki, saving her weeks of aggravation. Teleportation was goddamn fast. Maybe she couldn't teleport without using Threadcutter as a focus point, but sorcerers and wizards like Yen Sid could move between worlds in the blink of an eye.

But Merlin *hadn't* said anything.

And with her knuckles cracking one by one, turning white from the pressure, Ryuko struggled asking what was blatantly obvious.

“Satsuki never spoke with Merlin, did she?”

“Unfortunately, the wizard was away doing who-knows what until yesterday morn’.”

Scrooge grumbled out the corner of his bill. It was never pleasant giving terrible news. And the particularly terrible nature of the situation only made things more loathsome, “I suggested she wait around until Merlin returned. Or, if she was in a hurry, head over to yon castle and speak with someone in charge. But to me surprise, Satsuki declined. For some reason, your sister already knew ye weren’t on this world. Because if ye were here, things would be... ach, what was the bloody phrase... akin to a rampaging bull in a china shop.”

A chill raced through Ryuko’s heart as she refrained from punching the nearest wall, “... when did Satsuki leave?”

“About eight days ago, I’m afraid.”

It was distasteful to the richest duck in the worlds, but with somber acceptance, Scrooge continued, “I can see something terrible musta separated ye. I’d be pleased as punch to help in any way I could, but Satsuki dinna say where she was heading. I don’t think she knew quite well herself. But someone as tough as your sister won’t let anything stand between her and something she wants! Which is why I’m certain ye’ll eventually meet. Family is never more than a skip, hop and a jump away! Ye can trust me on that! After all, if I had one Gil every time me good-for-nothing nephew appeared out of the blue, I’d be a slightly richer duck!”

Ryuko *knew* she should be angry.

After coming so goddamn far... risking life, limb and heart over and over again... she missed Satsuki by just over a week. It felt like

Ragyo Kiryuin punched her in the gut. A few months ago, she would have demanded the duck tell her everything he knew. Even the stuff he didn't think was important.

But she felt oddly relieved.

The tension twisting her heart into all sorts of weird knots and shapes disappeared. Things looked freaking bad. They were a goddamn nightmare. But despite everything looking batshit insane, she wasn't back at square one. Coming to Radiant Garden hadn't been a complete waste of time. Sure, she missed reuniting with Satsuki by the skin of her teeth. And yeah, her sister was probably halfway across the Realm of Light. But for the first goddamn time since that masked psychopath destroyed everything she loved... back when things were peaceful and quiet after stopping their bitch of a mom... she wasn't alone.

Satsuki was out there somewhere, alive and well, looking for her.

A hitching noise escaped her lips. Thick tears welled in the corners of her eyes. Through blurring eyes, Ryuko felt her fingers beginning to tremble. But with an embarrassed snort, she stopped herself from breaking down.

"Thanks for telling me that..."

A comforting silence passed between herself and the duck. The strange sense of relief made her feel better than she'd felt in weeks. But she wasn't done. Not by a long shot. There was still too much shit she needed to do. Satsuki might be fine and dandy, but that only gave her more reason to keep searching. Because if her big sis survived, Mako and the others had to be out there somewhere. And no matter how long it took, she wasn't gonna stop looking. She would find everybody, kick Vanitas's smug ass until he cried and bring her world back.

Blinking the tears out of her eyes, Ryuko coughed awkwardly, "Hey... uh... so, your ice cream any good?"

“Only the finest treat available!”

Scrooge was more than happy to regale Ryuko about his infamous sea-salt ice cream - the finest, most delicious treat in all the worlds. And that was the light-honest truth! He might be haggling over breaking into Lindblum’s overregulated market, but thanks to Merlin’s assistance, he’d visited dozens of worlds. He’d sampled innumerable desserts, treats and various confections, both cheap and disgustingly expensive. Delicious or otherwise. Which was why he could state with absolute certainty *his* product put them all the shame, “Tell ye what. As a small token of appreciation for your sister’s help, I’m granting you a lifetime ‘all you can eat for free’ pass, good at any of me businesses.”

“Huh?”

The unexpected offer threw Ryuko through a loop, “Wait, really?”

“Thanks to Satsuki, I’m weeks ahead of schedule. Her *free* assistance saved me millions of Gil!”

Hopping off the bench, Scrooge brushed phantasmal motes of dust from his jacket. He tipped his top hat forward, pushing down his feathers. And with a comfortable swagger, made a beeline towards his newest business. But at the last possible moment, he raised his cane into the air, grumbled loudly enough to draw unwanted attention, before slamming the expensive walking aid against the ground, “And while I abhor the very concept of generosity, Scrooge McDuck *a/ways* repays his debts! So, consider us even and me debt repaid! And don’t think of asking for anything else unless you’re willing to pay proper compensation!”

Several conflicting thoughts flickered throughout Ryuko’s exhausted consciousness as Scrooge walked into the ice cream shop, leaving her standing in the middle of the street. But after a moment, hands jammed into her jacket and goosebumps crawling up her arms, she snorted out the side of her mouth.

“Geez, for a rich guy, he’s stingy as hell.”

Chapter 6.3

If anyone could draw fanart of Threadcutter, that would be fantastic. Anyway, here's the next update.

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/6/61/Scissorblade.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20131225111916>]

"Gotta figure something out..."

The sea-salt ice cream melting in her mouth wasn't half bad. At least, compared against half the sugary crap back home. She didn't know the flavor. Hell, it wasn't any flavor she could recognize. But with the half-eaten popsicle pressed against her cheek, filling her mouth with numbing cold and goodness, Ryuko sat on the edge of the bubbling fountain, an ornate and expensive sculpture in the middle of the star-shaped plaza. One knee was pressed against her chest as she gripped the popsicle stick between her teeth before leaned backwards, staring at the starry skies.

"Satsuki must've left a clue."

She bit down on the half-chewed wooden stick.

Her sister wasn't the sort of person to not leave *something* behind. Half the crap she pulled at Honnouji Academy involved plans within plans. If Satsuki came to this world, she must've left behind a clue. Maybe a letter or coded message only she would understand. But for the first time in more than a month, worrying about her sister had lowered a few notches on her to-do list. That didn't mean she was gonna stop looking! Hell no! But if Scrooge was telling the truth, now was the time to start looking for information on Mako and the others.

Normal people.

Like Mako...

... and Gamagori...

"Ugh! It's too late thinking about this crap."

Yawning until she was fairly certain something slipped out of place, Ryuko pushed herself off the fountain, weary eyes staring at the darkened town, "Gonna start looking first thing in the morning. Maybe the big shot in the castle knows -"

["Well now, fancy meeting you here, Ryuko!"](#)

The world ground to a screeching halt.

In that same breath, she vaulted forward, pirouetting tightly through the air. She reached over her shoulder fingers looping around the Scissor Blade's handle before tearing the hardened Life Fiber blade out of its sheath. Accompanied by a brilliant explosion of twinkling crimson, Threadcutter manifested in her left hand. And with a snarl, toes curling inside her sneakers as she landed on the other side of the fountain, adrenaline flushed through her veins. The beginning of a plan - running away or going all out - began forming in her mind.

But her snarl intensified, turning outright vicious, when Ardyn Izunia perched one foot upon the fountain while smacked his lips together.

"I must confess, this is quite the delicious treat."

Finishing the ice cream with one final bite, the heinous traitor jovially chuckled, "Tense, are we? And here I thought we've become close acquaintances."

Ryuko crossed Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade, one over the other, "What the hell do you want?"

"Simply to talk."

Pulling the popsicle stick out of his mouth, Ardyn flicked it over his shoulder. And as the piece of wood was spontaneously enveloped within darkness, disintegrating into nothingness before reaching the

ground, he pressed one hand against his heart, "Consider it... a gesture of peace and goodwill."

Her eyebrow twitched. The sole of her right sneaker pushed off the ground. But despite the urge to release some of her more fanciful curses, she didn't so much as snort. After everything in Lindblum and Burmecia, giving Ardyn any sort of opening would be incredibly stupid. Not when he could kick her ass before getting out of bed in the morning. Flexing her fingers around Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade when the bastard chuckled, something that sent shivers down her spine, Ryuko bit her tongue at the mocking tone constantly beating against her heart.

"Despite your, shall we agree, *misplaced* concerns, I have no intention of ruining this beautiful world."

Ardyn raised a finger, just one, in front of his face before curling the digit against his palm. He would have said more. Truly, he would. But the hatred simmering within the dark depths of the girl's heart gave him pause. It forced him to reconsider. And, with intrigue born from that monstrous darkness lurking beneath the surface of Ryuko's existence, clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, "Ah, you believe I'm lying, don't you? Well then, if it shall bring the matter to a close, allow me to make the following offer."

Stomp!

"Lower your weapons and you have my word - nay, my guarantee - nothing shall happen to Radiant Garden nor yourself. This bastion of light shall remain undisturbed, its people free to continue their pointless and trivial lives. A most reasonable offer, wouldn't you agree?"

She couldn't help but snort at the bastard's smirk. A reasonable offer her ass! Who the hell would agree to something that goddamn stupid? Gnashing her teeth, fingers tightening around the Scissor Blade and Threadcutter, Ryuko all but spat, "And what if I don't believe anything you're saying, huh?"

Ardyn's smirk stretched beyond what should have been humanly possible.

"In Gizamaluke's Grotto, I confessed that killing you, in your current condition, would bring me scant satisfaction. And that was the truth."

He chanced another step towards the unnerved yet resourceful girl. With the surrounding darkness somehow growing *darker*, turning the shadows themselves into pools of nothingness and despair, the sound of his boots stomping upon stone achieved the desired effect. Tension and fear dwelled with Ryuko's heart. Emotions she was desperately attempting to suppress underneath a veneer of self-righteous anger and indignation. Feelings that, at least momentarily, granted her sufficient leverage to resist his presence, "Though the magnificent darkness lurking inside your heart has grown stronger, I'm content delaying my vengeance just a bit longer."

In one smooth motion, he removed the fedora from atop his head, smirking as his alabaster skin returned to normal, "My retribution against your interference is put on hold... until such time when I've destroyed everything you hold dear."

A bead of sweat dripped from Ryuko's chin.

Damn it!

God damn it!

Her inability to do something - or shit, anything - against Ardyn seriously pissed her off. The arrogant bastard was the strongest son of a bitch she'd fought since dear old mom kicked the bucket. Darkness oozed from his heart like water. She'd thrown everything except the kitchen sink at the asshole in Lindblum. Used every trick in the goddamn book. But that hadn't been enough. If Mickey and Gilgamesh hadn't saved her ass, she wouldn't be standing around, let alone breathing! And then in Burmecia, even using everything Beatrix and Steiner all but beat into her skull, techniques and skills

that would have been *real* useful back home, nothing had fazed the psychopath.

She wasn't stupid. Not about something like this. And that made everything worse.

If Ardyn wanted to destroy Radiant Garden for shits and giggles, who the hell could stop him? Her? Not a chance. Maybe with Senketsu, but on her own? No, he'd demolish her without breaking a sweat. But agreeing with Ardyn? Playing by his monstrous rules? It hurt her heart just considering doing something that goddamn moronic. But in the end, she didn't have a choice.

"... fine."

After what felt like an eternity, Ryuko hesitantly dismissed Threadcutter, leaving the Scissor Blade loosely dangling from her fingers, "... I'll listen."

"Splendid! I knew you would see things my way... given proper incentive."

Granting the bemused girl one of his most pleasant and friendly smiles, Ardyn took several halting strides, each accompanied by the noticeable brightening of the twilight shadows. The infamous castle of Radiant Garden - Hollow Bastion. The majestic structure was illuminated by pinpoints of brilliant light, casting the faux suggestion of safety on a world infested by troubling creatures. A paradoxical juxtaposition, if he could say so himself, given that, at the slightest provocation, everything could be torn asunder with naught by the subtest of pushes in the right direction.

["Aren't nursery rhythms curious things?"](#)

An affable grin stretched from ear to ear as he sauntered across the plaza, "Like this one, for instance:"

"Long ago, people lived in peace, bathed within the warmth of everlasting light. But eventually, generosity turned to greed. Friendship to suspicion. They fought over light, swallowed by avarice. And through these unholy actions, darkness tainted their Hearts. In time, this darkness spread, swallowing everything in its wake. And soon enough, the world disappeared within the darkness. However, despite this disparaging loss, fragments of that primordial light survived. Safeguarded within the pure memories of children. With these fragments, reality was remade. Worlds were brought into existence based upon what memories survived. Yet, despite their best efforts, true light still sleeps, concealed within the encroaching darkness."

His nonchalant gait halted with a purposeful lurch.

As he found himself standing between adjacent flower beds, the well-maintained nurseries rustling gently in the midsummer's breeze, Ardyn sharply pivoted. The sudden abrupt motion brought him face-to-face with Ryuko, "As you've undoubtedly surmised, I'm referring to the War of Legend. The Keyblade War."

The silence radiating from the girl's monstrous heart frustrated him naught. Yet it remained fascinating. Underneath her admittedly quite human appearance laid far more darkness than one could hope to comprehend. Strutting forward without regard for his own safety, amused in the barest sense by the tension rippling through Ryuko, he chuckled. A soft and melodious sound which had the desired effect, "Millennia ago, countless wielders of the Keyblade fought over Kingdom Hearts. Each sought its incredible power for themselves. It was this clash that sundered reality. Avarice which introduced darkness and original sins of man to the world, forever staining existence with their folly. Or so the legend goes."

With another step, he turned sideways, gazing across the darkened waters at the mountains looming over the horizon.

"Shall I confess what *really* happened?"

Ryuko's sneer was visible from Hollow Bastion, "I don't really care!"

"Ah, but this is something I believe you, of all beings, would find quite fascinating..."

Her grimace twisted into outright disgust at the darkness flickering around Ardyn. The purplish-black made her nauseous. And by the time he teleported behind her, moving fast enough that she literally blinked slower than he moved, she spun around, sneakers pushing off the ground.

"There once existed a man."

Ardyn didn't react when Ryuko instinctively retreated in the opposite direction, seeking to place considerable distance between them. An intelligent move, yet one lacking the basics of common sense. For the girl, no matter what she attempted, was never more than a hair's breadth away. Nevertheless, amusement tainted his features as he watched Ryuko land back on the ground, Scissor Blade at the ready despite his completely honest declaration of peace.

"His identity remains unknown. His name lost to the fog of ages. And yet, this man... cruel and cunning as one could hope to aspire... gazed into Kingdom Hearts. He observed the truth of reality itself. And with that forbidden knowledge, crafted the very first Keyblade. Becoming a master in his own right."

A whistle passed between Ardyn's lips as he reached down and plucked one of the many flowers, "Using the Keyblade, this man crowned himself the protector of light. However, despite his strength, this task proved too daunting. A master he might have been, but in the end, he was only one man. And so, he sought assistance, six children to be precise, to help vanquish the darkness which lurked within the hearts of man. To carry on his work if, or perhaps when, he departed the mortal realm."

"Let me take a wild guess!"

Ryuko flexed her fingers, one twitch from transforming the Scissor Blade into Decapitation Mode regardless of the consequences, "You were this so-called master?"

"Flattering... but no."

He pinched his fingers, uncaring about the rose's thorns. In a flicker of darkness, the testament to beauty and life disintegrated into ash, "The apprentices formed collectives to preserve the light. Five, in fact. One for each of them. But the sixth, you might be curious, embarked upon a different path. Instead of recruiting able-bodied hearts and minds, they watched over their comrades without interfering. Just as their master ordered. For you see, Ryuko, this master of masters..."

"... a man who, by all rights, dedicated himself to defending the light..."

Ardyn's dark amusement was tainted by sadism as he rubbed his fingers together, removing whatever remained of the rose, "... knew about the Keyblade War long before the first blade was swung."

Something *twitched* inside Ryuko's chest, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"The master had a... shall we say... unique ability. He could peer into the future. Nothing escaped his all-encompassing gaze," Ardyn clarified as he stood up, looming over the maintained garden, "He saw what was to transpire. The thousands upon thousands of hearts lost to darkness. And without the slightest hesitation, surrendered himself to the inevitability of destiny and fate."

To Ryuko, his tone somehow grew darker, putting her further on edge.

"Like I believe any of that crap!"

She had no goddamn idea where Ardyn was going with this. Why the hell was he talking about the Keyblade War? There had to be a point to his blabbing! But the expanding darkness around her sneakers didn't explain why she suddenly felt like someone plunged her heart into cold water. Or why half-remembered dreams flickered across her mind. As her snarl slowly twisting into full-blown frustration, eyes viciously narrowed and fingers shaking, she aimed the Scissor Blade at Ardyn, "If you're going to spew bullshit, at least have it make sense!"

"What you believe is irrelevant..."

Raising another finger, Ardyn slowly entwined them, his voice never faltering, "Upon the war's conclusion, five of the master's apprentices vanished. As if they never existed in the first place. But the sixth survived. They observed the newly fractured world from within the shadows. And when it came time to fulfill his master's instructions down to the very letter, they took under their guidance two brothers, each eager to inherit the power and responsibility of the Keyblade."

A sense of *wrongness* squeezed Ryuko's heart when something in the atmosphere shifted.

"The two brothers trained diligently from dawn to dusk until they could scarcely move. In the halls of their forefathers, they competed for their master's approval. Day after day... month after month... they dedicated themselves to following in their master's footsteps. For you see, Ryuko, only one could properly inherit that power. And yet, as the fated time approached for their master's decision, both brothers realized they were evenly matched, neither stronger than the other."

A hiss tore through Ardyn's throat while his skin paled to a sickly alabaster, darkness oozing from his orifices, "Thus, his heart tainted by jealousy and treachery, one brother convinced their master his sibling had surrendered himself to the darkness. A betrayal which saw him permanently ascend into their master's good graces... and

cast his brother forevermore from the light. Making a true monster of him."

Once the asshole stopped talking, Ryuko spat on the ground.

"Geez, not to sound obnoxious, but I really couldn't care less!"

Swinging the Scissor Blade onto her shoulder, she scoffed at the centuries-old psychotic manchild, "Boo-freaking-hoo! You really think that sob story's gonna change my mind? Make me understand you or something? Go fuck yourself! No wonder your brother stabbed you in the back! With all that darkness oozing from your heart, I would have done the same thing!"

"Perhaps..."

It was a single word.

Two syllables strung together.

But Ryuko felt the hatred lingering behind Ardyn's answer. The darkness brushed against her heart. It knocked the air from her lungs. Sweat trickled down her face. And relying on the instincts which saved her ass more times than she could remember back at Honnouji Academy, she pushed off the ground. Dust clung to her sneakers as she cleared the fountain, placing the three-ton marble sculpture between herself and Ardyn, while Threadcutter materialized in her empty left hand, balancing out the Scissor Blade in her right.

"Ah, do forgive me, Ryuko. I almost forgot congratulations were in order."

Unconcerned by the girl's uncouth behavior, Ardyn mockingly bowed. He swept an arm through the air, pressing his fedora firmly upon his blackened heart, "Defeating a Hunter of the Dark is no small accomplishment. And doing so without releasing the darkness inside your monstrous heart? Marvelous! Simply marvelous! In my most of

humble of opinions, you've earned the right to call yourself Master Ryuko."

A hiss of danger whispered against her heart.

"Too bad the same cannot be said about the boy..."

Ryuko nearly threw herself at Ardyn before stopping herself, "Stay the hell away from Terra!"

"You need not worry, Ryuko. The boy interests me not."

Ardyn sauntered towards the fountain, staring into the darkened reflection of his handsome visage on the water's surface, before placing the fedora once more upon his head, "But allow me to grant you some advice. Or perhaps, a warning would be more precise, considering the circumstances."

The not-so-subtle threat reverberated within the shadows as he glanced over his shoulder at the girl, mouth curled into a smirk, "While you've proven quite resilient to the darkness, I'm afraid your friend's heart isn't so fortunate. Drawn forth by childish fears and appearances of inferiority, darkness whispers against his mind. Ah, if you only knew the terrible depths to which he sank..."

"Take your bullshit and shove it up your ass!"

Crimson light streamed around Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade, "There's no way Terra's ever gonna turn out anything like YOU!!!"

"Perhaps... perhaps not..."

Brushing aside the threat with less effort than normal, he nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders, "In any case, if you truly care about the boy, I recommend sticking around town. Terra's journey leads him here. No question about it. And when he arrives, heart stained and thoughts twisting upon themselves, you can see for yourself just how much he's surrendered himself to darkness."

An unnerving silence pressed against Ryuko's heart. Something made worse when the bastard continued walking away.

"Now then, if you'll excuse me, I must be off. Nevertheless, I wish you the best of luck in your search, Ryuko."

Tipping the brim of his fedora in some semblance of mock respect, Ardyn continued his slow and purposeful saunter across the fountain plaza. But at the last moment, lingering on the edges of the surrounding darkness, glanced over his shoulder, "The loss of one's family is truly disparaging. So, rest at ease. For if I should stumble upon your sister at any point, you'll be the first to know."

Ryuko threw herself at the bastard.

Leaping into the air, she stomped both feet against the fountain, abruptly drawing her momentum to a screeching halt. With both the Scissor Blade and Threadcutter thrumming brightly with energy, she glared at Ardyn Izunia's retreating back. A hiss of air escaped her mouth as a hate-filled snarl. Her eyes darkened considerably. And in a flash of speed, she flew across the garden plaza, Scissor Blade scraping through the midnight air while Threadcutter sliced in the opposite direction.

But right before the two blades sliced past each other, Ardyn disappeared into the shadows.

A snarl tore through her throat at the unexpected lack of resistance. Her sneakers skidded across the ground, bringing her momentum to a screeching halt alongside the noxious odor of burning rubber, as she snapped her head back and forth, anticipating something. Anything But there was nothing. The son of a bitch was gone. Taking a deep breath, sweat beaded along the underside of her chin. Anger swelled in the depths of her heart, boiling hotter and hotter with every passing second.

And firmly planting the Scissor Blade into the ground, she reared her head back and *cursed* loud enough to rouse more than half the

slumbering world.

"GOD DAMN IT!!!"

Original Version

"Gotta figure something out..."

The sea-salt ice cream melting in her mouth wasn't half bad. At least, compared against half the sugary crap back home. She didn't know the flavor. Hell, it wasn't any flavor she could recognize. But with the half-eaten popsicle pressed against her cheek, filling her mouth with numbing cold and goodness, Ryuko sat on the edge of the bubbling fountain, an ornate and expensive sculpture in the middle of the star-shaped plaza. One knee was pressed against her chest as she gripped the popsicle stick between her teeth before leaned backwards, staring at the starry skies.

"Satsuki must've left a clue."

She bit down on the half-chewed wooden stick.

And then promptly spat the garbage onto the ground.

Her sister wasn't the sort of person to not leave *something* behind. Half the crap she pulled at Honnouji Academy involved plans within plans. If Satsuki came to this world, she must've left behind a clue. Maybe a letter or coded message only she would understand. But for the first time in more than a month, worrying about her sister had lowered a few notches on her to-do list. That didn't mean she was gonna stop looking! Hell no! But if Scrooge was telling the truth, now was the time to start looking for information on Mako and the others. People who wouldn't normally stick out like a sore thumb.

Normal people.

Like Mako...

... and Gamagori...

"Ugh! It's too late thinking about this crap."

Yawning loudly, she pushed herself off the fountain, weary eyes staring at the darkened town, "Gonna start lookin' around in the morning. Maybe the big shot in the castle knows -"

"Well now, fancy meeting you here, Ryuko!"

Ryuko's heart *froze* at the unexpected voice.

And in the time between successive heartbeats, exhaustion vanished from her mind.

She vaulted forward, pirouetting tightly through the air. Her right arm swung backwards, fingers looping around the Scissor Blade's handle before tearing the hardened Life Fiber sword from its sheath. Accompanied by the twinkling of crimson stars, Threadcutter materialized in her left hand. With a snarl, she landed back on the ground, toes curled inside her sneakers and anger thrumming through her heart. Adrenaline flushed through her veins, sharpening her senses and slowing down the passage of time. The beginning of a plan - running away or going all out at the start - began forming in her mind.

And then her snarl intensified, turning outright vicious, when Ardyn Izunia perched one foot upon the fountain before smacking his lips.

An almost finished popsicle of sea-salt ice cream in his hand.

"I must confess, this is quite the delicious treat."

Finishing the mysteriously-flavored ice cream with one final bite, Ardyn afforded Ryuko's unnecessary suspicion an amused smirk, "Tense, are we? And here I thought we've become close acquaintances."

Ryuko crossed Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade in front of her face, "What the hell do you want?"

"Simply to talk."

Pulling the popsicle stick out of his mouth, Ardyn flicked it over his shoulder. And as the piece of wood spontaneously burst into darkness-tainted flames, disintegrated into nothingness before touching the ground, he pressed one hand against his heart, "Consider it... a gesture of peace and goodwill."

Ryuko's eyebrow twitched. But despite the rising urge to release the few good curses waiting on the tip of her tongue, she remained silent. She didn't so much as snort. After everything that happened in Lindblum and Burmecia, giving Ardyn any sort of opening was incredibly stupid. But even not taking his bait meant crap if the guy could kick her ass halfway across Radiant Garden. Flexing her fingers around Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade, their handles growing sleek with sweat, she clenched her jaw when the bastard continued speaking like nothing goddamn changed.

"Despite your, shall we say, *misplaced* concerns, Ryuko, I have no intention of ruining this world."

Ardyn raised a single finger, just one, in front of his face before curling the digit against his palm. He would have said more. But upon sensing the hatred simmering in the depths of her heart alongside that intriguing and monstrous darkness, he clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, "Ah, you believe I'm lying, do you? Well then, if it shall bring the matter to a close, [allow me to make the following offer.](#)"

Taking a single step away from the fountain, his mouth stretched into a grotesque smile.

"Lower your weapons and you have my solemn word nothing shall happen to Radiant Garden nor yourself. This bastion of light in the

darkness shall remain untouched, its people free to continue their pointless and trivial lives.”

Ryuko snorted at the insane offer. With her heart beating a mile a minute, her fingers tightened further around the Scissor Blade and Threadcutter, “And what if I don’t believe a single word you’re saying, huh?”

His laughter echoed inside her mind.

And then the surrounding darkness somehow grew *darker*.

“In Gizamaluke’s Grotto, I confessed that killing you, in your current condition, would bring me scant satisfaction. And that was the truth.”

Ardyn chanced another step towards the unnerved teenager. The sound of his boots stomping upon stone and gravel reverberated in the growing darkness. He could see the tension and fear inside Ryuko’s heart. Emotions she was desperately suppressing underneath a weak veneer of anger and well-deserved hatred. Dark emotions which afforded her sufficient leverage to resist his presence, at least momentarily, “While the incomprehensible darkness lurking in the furthest depths of your heart has grown stronger, I’m content waiting just a bit longer.”

In one smooth motion, he removed the fedora from atop his head, smirking as his alabaster skin returned to normal, “My retribution against your interference is put on hold... until such time when I’ve destroyed everything you love and cherish.”

A bead of sweat dripped from Ryuko’s chin.

Damn it!

God damn it!

Her arms trembled from pent-up frustration. The inability to do something - or shit, anything - against Ardyn Izunia seriously pissed her off! But no matter how angry she got, one fact remained true. The arrogant bastard... darkness oozing from his heart like water... was the strongest son of a bitch she'd fought since dear old mom killed herself. She'd thrown everything at the asshole in Lindblum. And if it wasn't for Mickey and Gilgamesh saving her ass, she wouldn't be standing around, let alone breathing! Even using everything Beatrix and Steiner beat into her skull, techniques and skills that would have been *real* useful back home, her best attacks barely fazed the monstrous bastard.

If Ardyn wanted to destroy Radiant Garden for shits and giggles, she'd be the only one standing in his way. And whether she liked it or not, the guy was strong enough to tear her apart without trying. There'd be no one to help her. No Yen Sid teleporting at the last second. No assistance from Terra, Aqua or, hell, even Beatrix.

She didn't even have Senketsu...

After what felt like an eternity, snarling as darkness and shadows lengthened across the plaza, she hesitantly released Threadcutter into the depth of her heart, leaving the Scissor Blade dangling in her right hand.

"... fine."

"I knew you would see things my way... given proper incentive."

Shifting his gaze from the bemused girl, Ardyn took several halting steps, each accompanied by the noticeable brightening of the surrounding shadows. His fingers clasped the fashionable fedora tightly while amber eyes stared at Hollow Bastion. The infamous castle was illuminated by pinpoints of light, casting the faux aura of safety upon a world plagued by troubling creatures of darkness. A paradoxical juxtaposition, if he could say so himself, given that, at any point, things could effortlessly be torn asunder with naught but a subtle push in the right direction

“Aren’t nursery rhythms curious things?”

An affable grin stretched from ear to ear as he sauntered across the plaza, “Like this one, for instance:”

“Long ago, people lived in peace, bathed within the warmth of everlasting light. But eventually, generosity turned to greed. Friendship to suspicion. They fought over light, swallowed by avarice. And through these unholy actions, darkness tainted their Hearts. In time, this darkness spread, swallowing everything in its wake. And soon enough, the world disappeared within the darkness. However, despite this disparaging loss, fragments of that primordial light survived. Safeguarded within the pure memories of children. With these fragments, reality was remade. Worlds were brought into existence based upon what memories survived. Yet, despite their best efforts, true light still sleeps, concealed within the encroaching darkness.”

His nonchalant gait halted with a purposeful lurch.

As he found himself standing between adjacent flower beds, the well-maintained nurseries rustling gently in the midsummer’s breeze, Ardyn sharply pivoted. The sudden abrupt motion brought him face-to-face with Ryuko, who was still standing across the plaza, “As you’ve undoubtedly surmised, I’m referring to the War of Legend. The Keyblade War.”

The continuing silence radiating from the girl’s heart frustrated him naught. Yet it remained fascinating. Ryuko’s outwardly ordinary appearance concealed the immense darkness inside her strange and monstrous heart. Strutting forward a single step, amused in the barest of senses by the tension rippling through the girl’s body, he chuckled. A soft, playful sound which had its intended effect, “Millennia ago, ancient wielders of the Keyblade fought over Kingdom Hearts. Each desired its incredible power for themselves. It was this primordial conflict that sundered reality. This clash of avarice introduced darkness and the original sins of mankind to the world. Staining existence with their folly. Or so the legend goes.”

With another step, he turned sideways, gazing across the darkened waters at the mountains looming over the horizon.

“Shall I confess what *really* happened?”

Ryuko’s sneer was visible from Hollow Bastion, “I don’t really care!”

“Ah, but this is something I believe you, of all beings, would find quite fascinating...”

Her eyes narrowed, brow furrowing into a disgusting glower, when flickers of darkness wafted from Ardyn’s body.

And by the time he teleported behind her, less than a second later, she was already moving.

“There once existed a man.”

Ardyn didn’t react when Ryuko instinctively retreated in the opposite direction, seeking to place considerable distance between them. An intelligent move, yet one lacking the basics of common sense. For the girl, no matter what she attempted, was never more than a hair’s breadth away. Nevertheless, amusement tainted his features as he watched Ryuko land back on the ground, Scissor Blade at the ready despite his not-so-subtle warning. A bold move, if one could call it that. But without a shred of concern residing in his dark and twisted heart, he continued.

“His identity remains unknown. His name lost to the fog of ages. And yet, this man... cruel and cunning as one could hope to aspire... gazed into Kingdom Hearts. He observed the truth lurking beneath the very fabric of existence. And with that forbidden knowledge, crafted the very first Keyblade. Becoming a Master in his own right.”

A soft whistle passed between Ardyn’s lips as he reached down and, ever-so-gently, plucked one of the many flowers, “Using the Keyblade, this man crowned himself the protector of light. However,

despite his strength, this task proved too daunting. A master he might have been, but in the end, he was naught but one man. And so, he sought assistance. After ample consideration, he chose six children to assist in his efforts to defend the light. To banish the darkness from humanity's embrace. To carry on his work if, or rather when, he departed the mortal realm."

"Tch! Let me take a wild guess!"

Ryuko flexed her fingers, one twitch from transforming the Scissor Blade into Decapitation Mode regardless of the consequences, "You were this so-called master?"

"Flattering... but no."

He pinched his fingers, uncaring about the rose's thorns. In a flicker of darkness, the testament to beauty and life disintegrated into ash, "The apprentices formed collectives to preserve the light. Five, in fact. One for each of them. But the sixth, you might be curious, embarked upon a different path. Instead of recruiting able-bodied hearts and minds, they watched over their comrades without interfering. Just as their master ordered. For you see, Ryuko, this master of masters..."

"... a man who, by all rights, dedicated himself to defending the light..."

Ardyn's dark amusement was tainted by insanity and sadism as he rubbed his fingers together, removing whatever remained of the rose, "... knew about the Keyblade War long before the first blade was swung."

Something *twitched* inside Ryuko's chest, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"The master had a... shall we say... unique ability. He could peer into the future. Nothing escaped his all-encompassing gaze," Ardyn clarified as he stood up, looming over the maintained garden, "He

saw what was to transpire. The thousands upon thousands of hearts lost to darkness. And without the slightest resistance, surrendered himself to the inevitability of destiny and fate.”

To Ryuko, his tone somehow grew darker, putting her further on edge.

But the lengthening shadows approaching her shoes didn’t explain why she suddenly felt like someone plunged her heart cold water. Why half-remembered dreams and weird thoughts flickered across her mind. Her mouth twisted into a grimacing snarl. The Scissor Blade felt heavy in her hands as Ardyn turned around, staring directly into her eyes. She had no freaking idea what the sadistic bastard was talking about! Who the hell cared about some stupid war? It was thousands of years ago, long before she was born! Shit! It was long before everybody was born!

“Like I believe any of that crap!”

Spitting on the ground, she twisted sideways, aiming the Scissor Blade directly at the psychotic monster, “If you’re gonna spew bullshit, at least have it make sense!”

“What you believe is irrelevant...”

Raising another finger, Ardyn slowly entwined them, his voice never faltering, “Upon the war’s conclusion, five of the master’s apprentices perished. But the sixth survived, observing the fractured world, just as intended. And when the time came, saw fit to fulfill their master’s final intent. Years after the Keyblade War, the remaining apprentice - or rather, the newest master - took under their guidance two brothers, each eager to inherit the power and responsibility of the Keyblade.”

Ryuko grimaced when Ardyn’s expression twisted into something insanely monstrous.

“The two brothers trained diligently from dawn to dusk until they could scarcely move. In the halls of their forefathers, they competed for their master’s approval. Day after day... month after month... they dedicated themselves to following in their master’s footsteps. To carry on his ideals and beliefs. For only one could properly inherit that power. And yet, as the time approached for their master’s final decision, both brothers realized they were evenly matched, neither stronger than the other.”

A hiss tore through Ardyn’s throat while his skin paled to a sickly alabaster, darkness oozing from his orifices, “Thus, his heart tainted by jealousy and treachery, one brother convinced their master his sibling had surrendered himself to the darkness. A betrayal which saw him permanently ascend into their master’s good graces... and cast his brother forevermore from the light. Making a true monster of him.”

Ryuko’s sneer deepened when the bastard finally stopped talking.

“Geez, not to sound obnoxious, but I really couldn’t care less!”

The Scissor Blade *sung* as she swung the hardened Life Fiber sword over her shoulder, “Boo-freaking-hoo! You really think that sob story’s gonna change my mind? Make me understand you or something? Go fuck yourself! It’s no wonder your brother stabbed you in the back! With all that darkness oozing from your heart, I would have done the same thing!”

“Perhaps...”

It was a single word.

Nothing more than two syllables strung together.

But Ryuko felt the *hatred* lingering behind Ardyn’s answer. The darkness lurking inside the bastard’s heart brushed against her own. It knocked the air out of her lungs. Sweat trickled down her face. And without thinking... relying on the instincts which saved

her ass dozens of times at Honnouji Academy... she pushed off the ground. Dust clung to her sneakers when she cleared the fountain, placing the nearly three-ton marble sculpture between Ardyn Izunia and herself, while Threadcutter once again appeared in her empty hand, balancing out the Scissor Blade quivering in her right.

“Ah, do forgive me, Ryuko. I almost forgot congratulations were in order.”

Unconcerned in the slightest by the girl’s uncouth behavior, Ardyn mockingly bowed. He swept an arm through the air, pressing his fedora firmly upon his blackened heart, “Defeating a Hunter of the Dark is no small accomplishment. And doing so without releasing the darkness lurking inside your monstrous heart? Marvelous! Simply marvelous! In this man’s humble opinion, you’ve earned the right to call yourself Master Ryuko.”

A hiss of danger pressed against her heart.

“Too bad the same cannot be said about the boy...”

Ryuko nearly leapt at Ardyn before stopping herself, “Stay the hell away from Terra!”

“You need not worry, Ryuko. The boy interests me not.”

Ardyn sauntered towards the fountain, staring into the darkened reflection of his handsome visage on the water’s surface. Heedless of the threat posed by the girl’s weapon, he casually replaced the fashionable fedora upon his head, “But allow me to grant you some advice. Or perhaps, a warning would be more precise, considering the circumstances.”

His voice reverberated sharply as he glanced over his shoulder at the girl, lips curled into a smirk, “While you’ve proven resilient to the darkness lurking within the deepest recesses of your heart, the boy’s quite different. His darkness bubbles near the surface. Drawn forth by childish fears and appearances of inferiority. It whispers

against his mind. Perhaps your little speech in Gizamaluke's Grotto bolstered his resolve. And yet, as we speak, he's already opened his heart to darkness. For if you only knew what Terra's accomplished in your absence..."

"Take your freaking bullshit and shove it up your ass!"

Flickers of crimson twisted around Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade, "There's no way Terra's ever gonna turn out anything like YOU!!!"

"Perhaps... perhaps not..."

The ancient traitor brushed aside the idle threat slumbering within Ryuko's defiance, "In any case, if you truly care about Terra's safety, I recommend sticking around town. The boy's journey leads him here. No question about it. And when he arrives, heart stained and thoughts twisting upon themselves, you can see for yourself just how much he's surrendered himself to darkness."

An unnerving silence pressed against Ryuko's heart as she tried - desperately and fervently - to reject the bastard's warning. Something made increasingly difficult when he continued walking away.

"Now then, if you'll excuse me, I must be off. Nevertheless, I wish you the best of luck in your search, Ryuko."

Tipping the brim of his fedora in some semblance of mock respect, Ardyn continued his slow and purposeful saunter across the fountain plaza. But at the last moment, lingering on the edges of the surrounding darkness, glanced over his shoulder, "The loss of one's family is truly disparaging. So, rest at ease. For if I should stumble upon your sister at any point, you'll be the first to know."

Ryuko threw herself at the arrogant bastard.

She didn't give a rat's ass whether or not Ardyn could easily wipe the floor with her.

All she cared about... the sole thought filling her mind, body and heart... was protecting Satsuki, Mako and everyone else!

Leaping into the air, she stomped both feet against the fountain, abruptly drawing her momentum to a screeching halt. With both the Scissor Blade and Threadcutter thrumming brightly with energy, she glared at Ardyn Izunia's retreating back. A hiss of air escaped her mouth as a hate-filled snarl. Her eyes darkened considerably. And in a flash of speed, she flew across the garden plaza, Scissor Blade scraping through the midnight air while Threadcutter sliced in the opposite direction.

Powerful or not, almost nobody could survive getting their freaking head chopped off!

But right before the two blades sliced past each other, the bastard disappeared into the shadows.

A snarl tore through Ryuko's parched throat at the sudden lack of resistance. Her sneakers dragged against the ground, bringing her momentum to a screeching halt as she looked back and forth, searching for any trace of darkness. But to her immense frustration, the son of a bitch was gone, leaving her alone. Sweat trickled down her cheeks while the disgusting taste of bile gently touched her tongue. She felt nauseous. Anger swelled in her heart, simmering hotter by the second. Until, with the Scissor Blade and Threadcutter shaking in her trembling fingers, Ryuko *cursed* loud enough to wake half the slumbering world.

"GOD DAMN IT!!!"

Last edited: Jan 29, 2019

Unknown Report 6

Oh, it's great that you started talking about Maleficent.

Unknown Report 6

"It's the power of true love that defeated you."

As she stumbled down the bridge, agony running rampant through her heart, Maleficent snarled at the impertinent Keyblade wielder's ridiculous assertion, "I will not be defeated... by something as paltry and insignificant... as love."

"Face it, you don't know the first thing about love!"

No doubt existed in Aqua's heart that, given another chance, the evil fairy would spread darkness and misery around the world. If she wasn't stopped, Maleficent would attempt to again steal Aurora's heart or kill Prince Phillip. The sorceress was that heinous and vindictive. She was well within her rights to ensure the safety of the world through any means. But at the same time, she remembered Master Eraqus's teachings. And attacking someone unable to defend themselves was wrong. It wasn't who she was.

"You're too clouded by darkness to see there's something even greater."

Aqua prepared herself when Maleficent's posture corrected itself, any lingering remnants of weakness quickly rectifying. But she wasn't frightened by the evil fairy. Even after fighting her darkness-corrupted form and nearly getting burnt alive by sickly green flames, compared against Ardyn Izunia... someone whose presence devoured light and left behind death and misery... the sorceress was nothing more than another pitiful villain.

"And even your darkness is nothing to be scared of!"

Maleficent's lips contorted into a hate-filled sneer, darkness once more filling her heart. Without the slightest warning, she pirouetted, purple lightning tainted by the corrupting power of darkness crackling around her magical staff, "You dare insult ME!?"

The magical attack was powerful. And for a brief moment, Aqua was surprised. But she'd already anticipated the evil fairy would attempt something so backhanded and cowardly. For in a flash of soothing light, Rainfell manifested from the innermost depths of her heart. As her fingers clasped the handle, she swung sideways, intercepting the lethal magic. Her elbow buckled under the constant assault. The smell of burning flames and nauseating darkness filled her nose. But with a defiant shout, Aqua deflected the attack back at Maleficent, sending the heinous sorceress stumbling.

"Try all you want! Attack me with darkness! But you'll never overcome a heart filled with light!"

After everything that happened, Aqua knew the sorceress couldn't beat her. It wasn't a question of power or strength. Or light against darkness. She'd simply come too far to lose against someone who didn't know the first thing about love or friendship, who cared only about themselves.

"Perhaps..."

Dispersing the wisps of smoke clinging to her robe, Maleficent accepted the girl's point, albeit hesitatingly. Yet even after failing to capture Aurora's heart, this was a temporary setback in her plans. The girl and her friends might have won the battle, but the war was far from over. No matter how much the girl foolishly believed in Terra's disgusting goodness, the boy's heart already belonged to darkness. His resistance to her particular brand of persuasion might have been far greater than anticipated, but he'd succumbed to her manipulations just long enough to extract Aurora's heart.

And even though she failed to *keep* it, now she knew the Keyblade was necessary to gather seven hearts of pure light.

“... but remember one thing, girl. As long as there is light, there will be darkness!”

Maleficent's sharpened fingernails caressed the slightly glowing emerald orb on her staff as she glared at Aqua, hatred and disgust merging into outright disdain, “You might foolishly believe love conquers all, but even the strongest and most noble light inevitably casts a shadow! And in time, more will be drawn to darkness! And they will all belong to me!”

With that final, threatening promise, the evil fairy's cackling visage disappeared inside a torrent of searing green flames. They covered most of the bridge, forcing the girl to backpedal out of harm's reach. And before the naïve Keyblade wielder recovered her bearings... for all the good it would do... Maleficent vanished, leaving behind nothing but smoke and heinous laughter rapidly fading upon the wind.

“Terra...”

Aqua refused to believe anything Maleficent said was the truth. The witch was lying! She knew Terra better than anyone! Even Master Eraqus! Maybe he had accidentally used darkness during the Mark of Mastery. But it had been to save Ryuko from the Heartless. The furthest thing from selfishness. He was strong enough to resist temptation. He would never fall under the influence of someone so heinously evil.

“... you better stay strong for me.”

Maybe if she moved quickly, she could catch up to Terra and Ven. But as she raised Rainfell, one soft breath from transforming the Keyblade, a hint of unfamiliar darkness pressed on her heart.

“What?”

It appeared in the blink of an eye.

Turning around, Rainfell resting heavily in her fingers, Aqua stepped backwards when a portal of circular darkness materialized into existence. The chaotic purple-black miasma hovered several feet off the ground. It floated ominously above the bridge, ringed by a glimmering shadow that swallowed the afternoon light. Yet even when nothing happened... no Unversed or monsters manifested on the bridge... she steeled herself for whatever might emerge from the disturbing gateway.

But the dense magic gathering around Rainfell dissipated when someone flew out of the portal, bounced against the bridge before crashing head-first into the balustrade.

“... ouch.”

For the umpteenth time since beginning his crusade, Gilgamesh lamented his inability to cast restoration magic. Ugh, his head hurt! What he would give for a Cure. He'd even settle for a potion. But no, the bureaucratic politicians in Lindblum decided he wasn't worthy of any reward money. They gave it all to Ryuko and Mickey. And the latter, for some utterly bizarre and asinine reason, gave his entire share to Ryuko, leaving Ryuko filthy rich and *him* destitute.

“That guy can really throw a punch...”

Grabbing onto the balustrade with one hand, another two propped on their elbows and a fourth rubbing his aching jaw, he slowly stood back onto his feet. Darn it, he was gonna be sore in the morning. But these minor scrapes and bruises were nothing to a veteran swordsman! Because once more, he'd achieved the impossible! After a harrowing journey across most of the known Realm of Light, including getting into a few fights with weird monsters, he'd acquired yet another fantastic legendary blade!

Now, all that remained was escaping and -

“Who are you?”

Gilgamesh nearly vaulted over the bridge into the murky waters at the unexpected question. But faster than a chocobo could snatch Gysahl Greens from someone's hand, he overcame the relatively minor embarrassment. Humph, a minor oversight! It was obvious to the casual observer the prince had an army of knights and warriors waiting outside the castle. But how many was the really important question. Anything more than one thousand would be difficult. Nay, impossible! Not to mention getting into trouble would certainly mean drawing some unwanted attention.

But when he spun around, intent on stalling the prince's army with witty banter, Gilgamesh's shoulders sagged with immeasurable relief. Something not readily noticeable thanks to his remodeled Genji Armor. For instead of a grand army of battle-honed knights bearing magical weapons, only one person stood on the bridge... other than himself, of course. A teenager with bright blue hair and matching eyes. Someone attempting to look tougher than they were... only to come across as adorably amusing.

"Bah, I don't have time to answer your ridiculous and misleading question!"

And that was the truth.

In fact, he didn't even have time to marvel the amazingly well-crafted and legendary Keyblade the girl was holding. Huh. For something forged from the depths of one's heart, the thing was duller than expected. But with a dry heave, Gilgamesh forced himself to remain focused. Sure, this might have been the first time he could stare at a Keyblade without either being in a life-threatening battle or the wielder vowing to castrate him if he ever set foot in Alexandria Castle again, but there were far more important things to worry about.

Like those three old fairies.

Even after escaping the castle with only a bruised jaw, he *knew* they were still searching for him. If he didn't retreat on the double, things

were gonna get bad. He might be thrown into a dungeon for the rest of his life!

Or worse, they could confiscate his collection!

“Now then... where did I put it...”

It was incredibly risky, but he simply couldn't wait another second! Reaching into his cloak despite the sinking feeling something terrible was about to happen, he withdrew his newest acquisition. The polished, almost perfect blade sat perfectly balanced in his grip. Its mirrored service, a brilliant silver nearly white in color, shimmered in the sunlight. This was indeed a rare - nay, a legendary - weapon. And yet, he was befuddled. For some odd and inexplicable reason, the prince had left the weapon unguarded across the room. He had been perfectly ready to challenge the heroic and noble warrior to a contest of strength. Their individual weapons would have been the prizes, granted to the winner.

In other words, *him*.

And yet, the weapon had been leaning against the wall. Almost like the guy *wanted* someone to take the legendary sword for themselves.

“The Blade of Truth, huh?”

His thoughts soured at the horrendous name, “Hmm... doesn't quite roll off the tongue. Lightbringer! Yes, now that's more like it! An appropriate name for a weapon as fine as this!”

“Drop that sword!”

He sensed the girl's straightforward attack long before the sniveling demand reached his ears. Flexing his knees, arms folded across his chest and taking a deep breath, Gilgamesh waited until the last possible opportunity... purely for aesthetics... before backflipping over the blue haired Keyblade wielder. His cloak and scarf fluttered

on the breeze. And when he returned to the ground, landing in a particularly amazing kabuki pose, found himself forced onto the defensive against the deluge of never-ending ice magic and physical strikes.

“Don’t be eyeing my swords now!”

With nothing more than an errant thought, Gilgamesh pulled his trusty naginata from the depths of his armor. He spun the bladed weapon around his hand. And as a sharp *ring* echoed across the bridge, intercepted the metallic blue Keyblade several inches from his handsome and pretty face, “Wait... those eyes look familiar. Do I owe you money or something?”

“That sword doesn’t belong to you!”

Pressing forward with all her strength, Aqua grimaced at the multi-armed thief’s ridiculous question, “Give it back!”

“Humph, I found this sword fair and square!”

Gilgamesh would have said more. In fact, there were several witty retorts waiting on the tip of his tongue. Including a really good piece of banter involving the handsome prince being too busy swooning over the broad to worry about fighting. But a strange and unnerving sensation crawled down his spine. There was a foreboding presence in the air. Frowning beneath his scarf, he ignored the blue haired girl’s disappointing strength. His brow furrowed into a glower. And upon realizing the awful feeling was coming straight from the castle, his heart sank into the pit of his stomach.

“Mwuhahaha! You have a lot of guts challenging ME!”

Ducking backwards, he quickly leapt out of the Keyblade wielder’s range. His boots stomped against the bridge with a resounding *thump*, creating twin circles of dust. His crimson and newly-pressed cloak fluttered gently in the breeze. And spinning his naginata overhead, ensuring the blue haired girl realized how sharp the blade

truly was, spun around before retreating as fast as possible, “But I’m too busy to fight! Next time you won’t be so lucky!”

“Wait!”

The cowardly decision took Aqua by surprise. Her eyes widened in shock. And for a moment, Rainfell slipped down her fingers. She’d expected the multi-armed criminal to fight. But running away? Breaking into a sprint, she chased the thief down the bridge, ice magic shooting from her Keyblade. With every step... every breath... she closed the distance. She could see the fear in his eyes when he looked over his shoulder. But when another portal of darkness manifested at the far end of the bridge, ripping into existence with an unnerving *whump* of displaced air, her pace briefly faltered.

Giving the criminal enough time to leap into the writhing darkness.

“Damn it...”

Aqua slowed to a jog... then a walk... before stopping altogether. She looked around the restored forest, searching for any sign of the criminal. But she felt nothing but wild animals and newfound tranquility. She didn’t know who the thief was... or why he wanted the Blade of Truth... but anyone using darkness in such a flippant and uncaring manner couldn’t have good intentions.

“Who was that guy?”

Chapter 6.4

I have to say, I'm impressed by the EVO demo. It looks pretty good for a game only 30% finished. But I'm really looking forward to the list of playable characters. Seeing how they translate Nui Harime's cartoonish movements and techniques into a video game will be interesting.

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/7/7a/Front_Doors_%28Art%29.png/720px-Front_Doors_%28Art%29.png]

“C’m on already!”

The guard to her right, idiot number one, didn’t blink, “Do you have an appointment with His Lordship?”

“No, but -”

“Unannounced visitors are strictly forbidden,” the other guard interrupted in an accent she couldn’t quite place. Something that caused her eyebrow to twitch for the third time since she woke up. With his fancy spear propped between herself and the only entrance into Hollow Bastion, the single dreadlock dangling over his face shifted when he brushed aside her growing frustrations, “Please vacate the castle grounds at once.”

For a moment, Ryuko considered telling the two morons where they could shove their stupid orders. Her eyebrow twitched alongside the corner of her mouth. Alright, so maybe asking the guy in charge of the place about Satsuki wasn’t gonna happen. It had been nothing more than a long shot from the start. But that didn’t mean she would walk away, not without first using her backup plan.

“Whatever...”

She stepped backwards, giving the two idiots enough breathing room to think. And maybe, if they were smart, the idea she wasn't about to beat her way into the castle. With her mouth pursed into a scowl, she bit the inside of her cheek before cocking her head sideways, "Just answer one question first, alright?"

At first, Ryuko was half-convinced they weren't going to take her bait. It was too obvious. And after arguing back and forth for ten minutes, which always led to the same question, she probably wasn't gonna get the time of day. But before she started wondering whether or not apologizing would help, the auburn-haired guard holding the weird axe-sword-thing decided to answer.

"Very well. What do you wish to know?"

"I'm lookin' for someone."

After listening to Ardyn's insane bullshit, she was seriously debating giving the morons her sister's name. An internal argument that lasted roughly seven seconds. It was pointless being paranoid. She didn't know *how*, but the bastard knew about Satsuki. Something she'd wasted most of the night thinking about. But one thing she *did* know was that spreading her sister's name around wasn't going to make things worse. And with that thought firmly etched into her heart, Ryuko clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, "Her name's Satsuki. She should have passed through town nine... maybe ten... days ago."

The guard with the long dreadlocks and ponytail grimaced, "The name is not familiar. What does she look like?"

"Satsuki has really big eyebrows, like caterpillars..."

Attempting to mimic the true thickness of Satsuki's eyes, Ryuko held two fingers above her own eyes, "... she's tall as hell... has straight black hair... acts all snooty and stuck-up..."

Her mouth twitched when the guards turned to each other, like they found her description nothing more than made-up bullshit. Grumbling in the back of her throat, she quickly pointed over her shoulder at the Scissor Blade, “Oh, and she has one of these.”

Aeleus found the description utterly ridiculous.

Perhaps the girl was telling the truth about such an outlandish individual. Stranger events have happened over the years. On the other hand, it was far more likely she was nothing more than a distraction, keeping them occupied while that group of teenagers snuck into the castle. Ridiculous! To fall for such an obvious and pathetic distraction after failing to apprehend the multi-armed thief who absconded with His Lordship’s sacred treasure would be a permanent stain on his record. However, the weapon sheathed across the teenager’s back, something unavailable to even the most audacious person in Radiant Garden, stopped him from professing as much.

“Apologies.”

Somberness tainted the word as he shook his head, “I cannot help you.”

“Ugh, damn it...”

Ryuko grumbled deep in her throat before pointing at the other guard, “What about him?”

“Nobody matching that description has approached the castle,” Dilan tapped the lance against the stone platform for emphasis, “Now please run along home.”

“And please be careful,” Aeleus sheathed his axe sword when it became apparent the belligerent teenager no longer intended on barging into the castle, “His Lordship increased security but monsters have recently been sighted roaming the streets.”

“Thanks for the advice, but I can take care of myself...”

Jamming both hands deep into her jacket, Ryuko scoffed over her shoulder as she marched back the way she came. This side quest had been nothing more than a freaking bust. Sure, at least she knew Scrooge had been right about Satsuki not bothering to speak with the big shot. But with that settled, she needed to start thinking about her next step. Radiant Garden was a pointless waste of time. Maybe she knew her big sis passed through, but that wasn't helpful to *finding* Satsuki.

A soft grumble bubbled up her throat. With a grunt, she listened to the soft *plopping* of her sneakers, counting each and every step as she approached the stairs. Why was she feeling so pissed off? Maybe she didn't know whether Ardyn knew about Satsuki or was just screwing with her. And that was terrible. But her sister was capable of taking care of herself. All she needed to do was trust in Satsuki. If she did that, everything would be alright. Eventually she'd run into her big sis, maybe on some random world, and things would be back to normal.

All she needed was *something* before she could start -

[“Whoa!”](#)

Ven raced up the stairs two at a time. Staring at the strange castle looming closer by the second, he forced himself to run faster. Mickey came this way! He was sure of it! As soon as he caught up, assuming the Star Shard doesn't spontaneously activate in the middle of something really important, the rest of his questions could be answered.

But as he cleared the final step, his eyes abruptly widened.

“... OW...”

The impact jarred his thoughts. Alright, maybe falling onto his butt wasn't exactly something that happened to most Keyblade masters-

in-training. If Aqua or Terra were around, he'd never hear the end of it. But it sure as heck beat the alternative. If he'd been a split-second slower, he wouldn't be the only person sprawled on the ground. His inability to pay attention almost harmed an innocent person. With a wince, he rubbed the back of his neck. He must have pulled something in his shoulder. Nothing a quick Cure couldn't fix. But if he'd watched where he was going, none of this would have happened.

Yet before he managed to apologize, Ven stiffened, mouth slightly agape, at the familiar face.

"Ryuko?"

Thanks to countless weeks of dealing with Mako's random friendship hugs and all-around desire to stay as close as physically possible, Ryuko sensed Ventus long before the kid burst onto the landing. She'd noticed his brown hair peeking over the stairs. Saw his surprise. And at the last possible opportunity, just as his blue eyes began widening, taken a single step to the right, moving out of harm's way. It might not have been nice. Sure, she could have caught him. But with somber acceptance and both hands firmly tucked into her jacket alongside bored bewilderment, she watched the kid fall onto his ass.

"Huh?"

When he called her name, she ignored the random thoughts popping into her head - like why he was in such a hurry or what the hell he was doing on Radiant Garden - to ask the only important question, "Ventus, right?"

"Call me Ven."

The correction was almost reflexive as he pushed himself back onto his feet. With a few quick pats, Ven brushed dust off his clothes. And once that was finished, not to mention quickly alleviating the pain in

his shoulder, he looked around, "Hey, you haven't seen Mickey, have you?"

"Mickey?"

Ryuko blinked at the question, "Nope. Sorry. Haven't seen the guy."

"Oh man..."

That *really* wasn't what Ven wanted to hear. Maybe he took a wrong turn and Mickey was somewhere in town? But looking around was going to take forever. Slouching forward with a defeated sigh, he shook his head, "... I coulda sworn it was him."

"Stop whining, would ya?"

Rolling her eyes at the childish reaction, she nudged Ven's ribs with her elbow, "If Mickey's here, he'll show up sooner or later. You just gotta trust your heart about crap like this."

"Yeah, you're probably right..."

Ven realized he must've sounded unconvinced, because Ryuko's head tilted slightly to the right, "Huh?"

"Just before coming here, me and Mickey fought the guy you're looking for."

Guilt gnawed at his heart. It was enough to almost make him feel sick. But no matter how horrible he felt, it was wrong to keep something this important a secret. Not from Ryuko. Not after everything she'd been through, "The same one who destroyed your world."

It happened suddenly, as if someone turned a switch. One moment she was smirking. And the next, every trace of happiness vanished from Ryuko's expression, "... what?"

"But that wasn't the first time I saw him."

Ven swallowed the lump in his throat, "Right after you and Master Beatrix left, I went back to my room. Only, when I got there, he was waiting for me. Before I could say anything, he started rambling nonsense about Terra becoming a different person. That if I didn't figure out the truth, Terra was gonna leave me behind. But when I threatened to stop him, he laughed and said I wasn't even strong enough to scratch his helmet. And then he started talking about you..."

The anger simmering to a slow boil in the depths of Ryuko's heart faltered, "Me?"

"Most of what he said didn't make any sense."

It was hard remembering *exactly* what the guy said. Sure, he could still hear the stupid warning about Terra. The mockery in the guy's voice was clear as day. But after another awkward second, enough returned to his heart that he managed forcing out the half-formed memories, "It happened after I demanded to know why he destroyed your world. Something about the question must have set him off. Because his voice got all cold and serious. He stopped laughing. I thought he was gonna attack. But he told me to pass along a message if I ever ran into you."

"What?"

When Ven hesitated, Ryuko almost spat out of the words, "What did he say?"

Visibly flustered by the anger radiating from Ryuko's conflicted heart, Ven nevertheless continued, "He said you were going to suffer for ruining his fun."

"I'm sorry, Ryuko."

Ven slouched when Ryuko didn't immediately say anything, "I can't even imagine how horrible it must feel losing your world. That's why, when he reappeared out of nowhere, I tried stopping him. I thought,

maybe, if I could take him down, it would save you a lot of trouble. You wouldn't need to worry about him anymore. But he was too strong. If Mickey hadn't saved me, I wouldn't be here talking to you."

He expected Ryuko to lose her temper. He braced himself for her reaction. But who could possibly blame her? The masked guy destroyed her world. The Keyblade was meant to protect people from darkness. It wasn't a weapon, but something to ensure the light within people's hearts never extinguished. And this guy... this monster... used it to destroy everything Ryuko cherished. All the people she loved... friends and family... were gone. For a moment, as he stood in front of Hollow Bastion, he saw something shift in Ryuko's expression. Her already feathery hair fluffed as her lower lip vanished into her mouth, concealed underneath sharpened incisors.

"Gotta say, knowing that psychopath hates my freaking guts makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside."

And just like that, the dark look in Ryuko's eyes vanished.

"Huh? Why's that?"

Ryuko forced a sadistic half-smirk, "Because if Vanitas is pissed about me screwing with his plans, eventually he's gonna come gunning for my ass."

It might not be close to what she wanted to hear, but this was proof Xehanort hadn't been completely bullshitting her about Vanitas. The masked bastard *really* hated her guts for messing up his plans. Maybe she owed the old geezer an apology. Right after the guy brought everything back. Because words were freaking cheap. And until Xehanort figured out a way to fix what his screw-up of an apprentice did, she would rather follow Gamagori's stupid rules to the letter than consider giving him the time of day.

"Anyway, thanks for the heads-up."

With an awkward halfhearted salute, Ryuko breathed deeply through her nose. Closing her eyes, she turned away from Ven, grumbled in the back of her throat and with just enough of a stumble, began the long trek down the stairs.

Despite what a lot of jackasses and idiots believed, she wasn't stupid by any measure. Even if she hated studying with the passion of a thousand suns, she was smart enough to fit things together. She had street smarts. Something that got her and Mako through Honnouji Academy by the skins of their teeth. What Vanitas blabbed to Ven about Terra becoming a different person and what Ardyn said about Terra giving into darkness despite the guy not having a mean bone in his body were connected. It couldn't be a coincidence. They had to be working together.

Her mind kept returning to what Xehanort confessed.

And suddenly, just like that, she had a lot more questions for the old geezer.

"If I see Mickey, I'll tell him you're in town."

She gave another halfhearted wave as her sneakers met the top of the steps, "Later."

Her unkempt hair barely disappeared beneath the top of the stairs when an Unversed floated around the large columns next to the castle doors. Accompanied by the grinding sounds of machinery and whirring motors, it hovered high above the entrance, red teardrop-like eyes focused upon the three remaining beings.

"Unversed!"

Ven glared at the Unversed hovering above the ground. How did it managed to sneak up on them? He should have sensed something this loud coming from a mile away. And worse, it felt different from the others. He didn't know how or why, but something about *this* flying monster whispered against his heart. Hissing when the

Unversed turned around and faced the guards instead of him, he pushed aside the sense of wrongness and swung his arm, Wayward Wind materializing within a flash of brilliant golden light.

If the monster was looking for a fight, he was going to give it one!

He'd only began sprinting towards the Unversed when explosive cursing stopped him dead in his tracks.

"... goddamn son of a bitch!"

The string of obscenities continued growing louder and louder. It started so suddenly that he stumbled, one arm spinning for balance. Cursing wasn't exactly something Master Eraqus allowed. Sure, he knew most of the worlds, but now that he thought about it, nobody actually swore. Terra, Aqua, Mickey or even the masked guy. It just wasn't something most people did. At least, none of his friends.

Except for Ryuko.

And with muted surprise, Ven watched Ryuko *launch* herself up the stairs, clearing the almost eighty-foot gap to the Unversed in a single bound.

"You ain't gettin' away!"

Threadcutter manifested within her clenched fingers before she was halfway to the Unversed. With her sneakers sliding along currents of magically-enchanted wind, Ryuko reached out and *clamped* her other hand around the monster's neck. Using her momentum, she tightened her grip, indenting the metal underneath her armored fingers, and swung clockwise, forcing the bastard sideways through the air. Latched tightly onto the Unversed, one sneaker planted against what had to be its face, she reared Threadcutter overhead, tendrils of light coalescing around the crimson Keyblade.

"TAKE THIS!!!"

It didn't look exactly the same.

There were some major differences.

The colors might have looked familiar, but the floating bastard was a lot smaller and less menacing. In fact, it was downright laughable. If she was in a better mood, she would already be laughing her freaking ass off. But there were more than enough similarities between the flying piece of scrap metal and the other suit of armor to force painful memories to the front of her heart. No matter how much time passed, she remembered searing agony as flames and darkness burnt her skin to a bubbling crisp. The excruciating pain as she was engulfed by the son of a bitch's surprise attack continued haunting her nightmares.

Her knuckles bled white as she forced more power into Threadcutter.

"STOCK -"

She nearly fell off when the Unversed lurched erratically.

"God damn it!"

Ryuko snarled as the monster listed back and forth. Holding on for dear life, her fingers almost slipping off the damn thing's neck, she grimaced at the constant whirring. Her eyebrows twitched when the Unversed began spinning. It twisted upside-down, backwards and every other direction. It even tried slamming her against the castle's front door, causing Threadcutter to fall from her fingers. But with the wind violently whipping through her hair, she ignored the blood trickling from her lips. Now that her other hand was free, she reached out, grabbed the first thing she could find, and *pulled*.

And as her Keyblade dissipated into crimson light long before reaching the ground, cursed profusely when the Unversed decided to rocket away from Hollow Bastion.

"Shit! Don't think I'm gonna give up that easily!"

Back on the ground, Ven watched Ryuko and the Unversed twist through the air. His eyes widened at her constant struggle to hold onto the monster. To keep herself from falling despite its best efforts. But when the creature slammed her against the castle before launching itself towards town, he hissed in the back of his throat and sprinted full-tilt down the stairs.

“Hold on, Ryuko! I’m coming!”

Last edited: Aug 4, 2018

Chapter 6.5

Where did you come from?

Ugh... what happened?

You're really having lots of fun, aren't you?

Huh?

Are you alright?

Why does my head feel like crap?

Hmm... you sure like sleeping, Ryuko.

How the hell do you know my name!?

Oh! You're waking up!

Ryuko winced as the world came back into focus.

"D-Damn it."

Her head hurt like a bitch. She felt like Gamagori shoulder-tackled her through Honnouji Academy. Or even worse, Beatrix decided to stop holding back during training because she'd pissed off Steiner for the last time. Grimacing as blood trickled down the contours of her face, oozing around her nose and over her eyes, she tried remembering what the hell happened only to come up blank. Through blurry eyes, she noticed pieces of wood on the surrounding floor. Groaning in the back of her throat, she tried taking a deep breath. To do something to clear her mind.

Only for spasms to wrack her body thanks to the cloud of dust clinging to the air, splattering the ground with blood and spit.

“S-Shit.”

Alright, maybe breathing deeply when surrounded by a cloud of dust was a bad idea. But after waiting for her lungs to fix themselves... and after another painful cough... Ryuko spat to onto the ground. She wiped the blood dripping from her lips against the back of her hand, leaving a crimson stain extending halfway up her forearm, before propping an arm underneath her body and rolling onto her back.

“Ugh...”

The sunlight streaming through the enormous hole in the ceiling fell right onto her freaking eyes. But despite being unable to see anything, Ryuko understood why she woke up laying in a pile of shattered wood. Something that, after a quick look around the dusty room, might have once been a fancy dinner table. Or maybe a nice dresser or something. But that wasn't important. Not when she was forgetting something *really* important! Lurching forward, she managed to sit up. Another strained cough pushed itself out of her lips, dribbling blood down her chin and causing her vision to briefly double.

Spitting to the side, Ryuko cleared her mouth before looking around the room, “What the hell happened?”

[“You fell through the ceiling.”](#)

She hadn't expected somebody to actually *answer*.

It was a goddamn surprise. If everything didn't feel so calm, bruised and bloodied or not, she would have leapt halfway across the room. Because standing next to her, barely out of her reach, was a girl about Mataro's age. Maybe a little older. A moment passed in silence. And then another. And before anything else happened, Ryuko rubbed a hand down her bloodied cheek. She stared into the girl's soulful green eyes. She offhandedly noticed the light brown hair woven into a thick braid reaching between her shoulders and framing

both sides of her face, making her appear several years older and wiser.

For a moment, she struggled to find the right words.

Then the girl crouched, the blue and white summer dress covering her skinned knees, and puffed her cheeks into a childish pout, "And you shouldn't use bad words. My mom says only bad people use swear words."

"Uh..."

Her mouth fell open into a stupefied expression before snapping it shut, "... sorry, I was just -"

The memories came flooding back.

"Sh... oot!"

Ryuko felt herself wincing from switching words at the last second.

Or maybe it was because she accidentally bit her tongue.

But in either case, she remembered every goddamn detail. The memories were coming back, flooding her mind and heart. And her mouth twitched. She'd been hanging onto the flying scrap metal, fingers digging into the white armored plates, waiting for the first chance to cut it right down the middle. But it had decided to pull some crazy stunts. The goddamn pile of crap pulled off several barrel rolls while rocking back and forth. And when *that* hadn't been enough, suddenly figured out it could fricking transform! All of those things had caused her grip to slip.

And the last thing she remembered was falling through the air, watching the Unversed fly away to some other part of town.

"Crud!"

Reaching for the nearest unbroken object, her fingers searched blindly before latching onto the edge of a fancy wooden cabinet. With the sound of her heartbeat pulsing against the dark recesses of her mind, she gnashed her bloodied teeth and *pulled* herself off the ground. It wasn't easy. Not when she felt like complete crap. But she managed to stand. And by the time her breathing steadied, most of the pain faded to a residual ache. Damn it, falling hundreds of feet through several floors and landing on a table was one of the most painful things she'd experienced. It was a close second to Ardyn's magic exploding against her face. And a distant third to the bastard stabbing his goddamn weapons through her chest.

But the minor discomfort was the least of her problems.

Her fingers dug into the cabinet, leaving scratches on the polished wood, "It got away!"

"You should lie down."

Ryuko's train of thought was broken when the girl latched onto her arm, "Normal people don't just fall from the sky! You should wait until my mom comes home! She knows a doctor!"

"Thanks, but I'll be fine."

It took some serious effort, but she managed to disentangle herself from the overly-protective girl. Maybe it was the blood loss beginning to affect her judgement, but something about the girl reminded her of Mako. Not a lot. Just in the inhuman ability to *know* when she was only pretending to be fine. In any other case - hell, if she wasn't in the middle of a goddamn fight - she would take the advice. But she didn't have time to rest. And thanks to Ragyo Kiryuin, she could focus on tracking down the Unversed instead of worrying about cuts, bruises and sore muscles.

But she'd barely taken a single step towards the front door when a strange guilt manifested in the depths of her heart.

The corners of her mouth twitched when a book fell through the enormous hole in the ceiling, crashing onto the ground next to her sneaker. Morbid embarrassment flushed through her body. And the curious look in the girl's eyes wasn't helping. Without so much as a word, Ryuko reached into her jacket, grabbed something by the handful and grumbled despondently under her breath.

"Here! Take this!"

The stack of Gil was crumpled into a thick wad. There were a few bloodstains on the corners. And at least ten percent of the bills were slightly ripped. But the small fortune didn't mean anything. It was just money. If it couldn't help her find Satsuki, Mako and everyone else, it was nothing more than fancy paper and coins, "This should be enough to fix your house."

"Wow..."

Innocent green eyes widened at the Gil being shoved into her hands, "... you're rich! Just like Mr. Scrooge!"

Ryuko was only partially listening when the girl started counting all the cute, cuddly and annoying things she was going to buy.

Running a hand through her hair, she glowered at the dust and plaster tinting it a pale shade of white. Something that was easily fixed with a quick shake of her head. And after patting down her jacket, then making sure the Scissor Blade was where it belonged, took a deep breath, "Anyway, tell your mom I'm really sorry about screwing up your house, but I gotta get going -"

"I'm Aerith."

After carefully, in her own fashion, hiding the crumpled Gil in the nearest cabinet, Aerith hummed happily. A wide smile exposing several missing teeth met Ryuko's confused stare as she picked up an overturned by somehow unbroken vase, her sandals disturbing

the puddle of water on the floor, and replaced the flowers one by one, "What's your name?"

"Uh... Ryuko."

"Ryuko, huh?"

Once the vase was standing on top of the cabinet, Aerith spun around, dust covering her dress, and smiled even wider, "That's a funny name. You're a really weird person, Ryuko."

"Yeah... yeah... laugh it up..."

Ryuko wanted to say more. In fact, she opened her mouth, but seeing Aerith laugh immediately deflated her bluster. With an exasperated groan, she rubbed her forehead, attempting to stave off the headache, "Whatever! Hey, quick question! You see which way that monster I was fighting went?"

"Hmm..."

In an almost indifferent tone, Aerith brushed down her dress, leaving behind streaks of white dust, "... after you fell from the sky, I saw something weird. It was only for a second... and things were really dusty... but I'm super sure it was heading *that* way."

Ryuko felt herself smirking.

"Thanks!"

She couldn't waste another second. Sure, Ven had a Keyblade and was probably really strong, but the Unversed was *her* problem! She was gonna be the one to reduce that floating piece of crap to scrap metal, rusted wires and whatever darkness brought it to life! And with that anger flushing her heart, pushing away any lingering traces of hesitation, she pulled open the front door, mouth twitching at the crisp summer afternoon slamming against her face. For a moment,

Ryuko stood in the doorway, hands gripping the wooden frame and dark blue eyes glaring at the castle looming over the town.

And after looking around, glancing back and forth in case the monster decided to circle back, pivoted sharply, tensed her shoulders and sprinted full-speed to the right.

But not before shouting one final apology over her shoulder.

“I’m sorry about the roof!”

Chapter 6.6

There are certain scenes I've plotted long before getting to them. While most of the story changes based upon what I write, certain parts are set in stone. Things I planned from the very beginning. Ryuko becoming Beatrix's pupil was one of them. And what happens in this scene is another.

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/2/2f/Outer_Gardens_%28Art%29_2.png]

The moment she sprinted through the gates, Ryuko knew something wasn't right. She could *feel* it. The peaceful tranquility clinging to the air was too obvious.

Spitting out the corner of her mouth, she shifted her center of balance, sneakers *sliding* across the damp stone covering most of the outer gardens. She lurched forward, pivoted clockwise and glanced around, searching for the slightest trace of darkness. Or hell, even a little destruction. Anything that made sense! But there was nothing. Dusty fingers clenched into fists at the surrounding emptiness. Feathery bangs of black and crimson fell over her narrowed eyes as she snarled out a painful curse, clenched teeth pulling her lips apart.

"Damn it!"

For a few impossibly long seconds, the bubbling fountains across the plaza assaulted her ears. Birds and other animals chirped in the background, ignorant of the anger simmering inside her heart. The wind blowing off the magically still waters surrounding the town brushed against her face. But as she took another step deeper into the outer gardens, Ryuko's frustration evolved into tranquil fury. Her eyebrow began twitching. She pursed her lips together.

And with some combination of anger embarrassment bubbling in the deepest and darkest corners of her mind, snarled, "Crap!"

There was nobody around, not even any of those weak-as-hell shadow Unversed. *Someone* gave her screwy information! There was no other reason why the Unversed was here waiting for her! Why the hell had she even trusted Aerith to know anything?

"Tch! Great... just freaking great..."

With her eyes scrunched and brow furrowed into a twitching glower, Ryuko folded her arms together... she tilted her head forward until her chin touched her jacket... and angrily plopped onto the waist-high stone wall surrounding the plaza.

It took a lot of goddamn effort, but she cleared her mind. And once she wasn't thinking about punching something, took another breath before blowing away the strand of crimson hair dangling over her eye. She knew better than anyone else that getting angry wouldn't solve anything. Not in a situation like this. Breathing deeply through her nose, she tried imagining where the excuse of an eldritch abomination might be hiding before quickly giving up.

"Ugh... where the goddamn hell is it!?"

None of this made sense! An Unversed of that size, annoyance and power wasn't exactly something people normally missed. But she hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary. No guards running around. No destruction or smoke rising into the sky. Hell, she hadn't even run into some of the random encounters that seriously pissed her off.

Which meant only one thing.

"... did Ven take care of it?"

Ven destroying the Unversed made sense. After all, right before that flying piece of crap monster took her for a joyride across town, she'd seen him running down the stairs. And he did have a Keyblade.

While that was fine in her book, she was still annoyed as hell! If the Unversed hadn't gone ape shit, she'd be well on her way to another world. Not to mention a few tens of thousands of Gil richer. Her mouth twitched. Closing her eyes, she leaned backwards, an annoyed groan echoing across the normally tranquil plaza as she expressed the emotions writhing in her heart.

Why the hell was she getting angry? As long as *somebody* killed the damn creature, there wasn't any point worrying about that sort of stupid crap. Besides, as far as she could tell, there weren't any deaths... or worse... from the Unversed. Everything was perfectly normal.

For the briefest of moments, Ryuko found herself settling into some strange and weird combination of contentment and calmness. Even the anger flushing through her heart abated.

Then her eyes snapped open.

"Shit! I gave Aerith all my freaking money!"

The realization slapped her in the face. It made her vault off the wall, sneakers *slapping* against the ground. What the hell had she been thinking? Sure, it was only a small part of what she earned for saving Lindblum, but that had been everything she had. Now she needed to go back to Alexandria. Groaning into her cupped hand, Ryuko dragged her fingers down her face. She slouched forward, another curse sitting on the tip of her tongue. God damn it, why was she so stupid?

"Huh? Ryuko?"

As his eyes readjusted to the blazing sunlight, bringing the outer gardens into full majesty, Terra's heart skipped a beat.

"You're alright!"

Elation bolstered his heart despite noticing Ryuko's unkempt, dusty and bloodied appearance. Breaking into a sprint, he rushed into the outer gardens, mouth curled into a smile, energy flooding his veins.

When Ven claimed Ryuko was somewhere in Radiant Garden, he'd been skeptical. And for good reason. Sure, he expected to run into Ryuko at some point. They were working towards the same goal. And knowing Ryuko, the first time Vanitas reappeared from the shadows, she'd be the first person to punch the smirk off his face. But so quickly? It seemed too good to be true. It was only after they destroyed the merged Unversed that Ven's *true* reason for worrying about Ryuko became apparent. She'd been hanging onto the Unversed when it retreated from the castle. Only when he arrived at the reactor alongside himself and Aqua, she hadn't been there.

They'd assumed the worst.

And as far as he knew, Aqua and Ven were searching Radiant Garden.

He laughed nervously while stumbling to a halt. Slouched forward, both hands planted onto his knees, he shook his head and grinned, "Oh man, Ven's gonna be relieved knowing you're fine."

Ryuko's eyebrow twitched at Ven's name. God damn it! If Ven destroyed the Unversed, he probably thought she was dead or something. But instead of slapping herself in the face, she stared at Terra, eyes widening from a mixture of bewilderment and confusion, "Terra? What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question."

Terra released a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. The tension in his heart dissipated, at least somewhat. Knowing that Ryuko was okay was a relief. If it wasn't for that random thug appearing out of nowhere, he would have continued searching town. Just like Aqua and Ven were probably doing. With a staggered sigh, he leaned backwards, the corners of his mouth twisting into a

worried frown as he took a hurried look around the suspiciously empty gardens.

“When you didn’t show up, Ven thought you might be hurt,” he paused, if only briefly, before relaxing, “But it looks like you had your own fair share of trouble.”

“Tell me about it...”

An awkward silence passed between them. It made the surrounding ambience even stranger. And Ryuko, despite briefly pulling at the jacket clinging to her dusty arms, traces of blood staining the fabric, muttered under her breath. It was freaking *embarrassing* falling off an Unversed! If Beatrix found out, she would never hear the end of it! For a moment, she felt her heart freeze. But as long as nobody knew she crashed through the roof a house, everything would be fine. It was only a matter of leaving Radiant Garden before Aerith’s mom realized what happened.

“Hey...”

While she was still annoyed and embarrassed, Ryuko couldn’t help but notice the bloody gash on Terra’s shirt. The tear stretched across the right side of his stomach, almost completely severing one of the red suspenders. It looked trivial. Nothing even close to what her own clothes went through every day. But still, she grinned, “I’m guessing that flying piece of scrap metal wasn’t such a pushover, huh. How badly did it kick your ass?”

“Well, it wasn’t easy.”

Terra grimaced at the bloodied burn tracing across his stomach. It had been reckless. Something utterly foolish. But charging into the swarm of lasers had been necessary to destroy the Unversed before it could flee into town, “... but compared against that Heartless we fought, a few transforming Unversed were a walk in the park. Nothing Aqua, Ven and me couldn’t handle.”

Ryuko noticed something *off* about Terra's reaction, but after a moment's thought, she moved onto more important matters.

"Wait! Aqua's here too!?"

It happened again.

She barely managed to ask the question - or maybe, blurt out random words in surprise - before Terra's expression pulled a complete reversal. One moment he was smiling. Then, like a freaking switch, there wasn't a trace of happiness in his heart. She was missing something important. And it pissed her off. Taking a forceful step away from the guy, she jabbed both hands into her jacket, cocked her head sideways and snorted, "Alright, what the hell's going' on between you and Aqua?"

"... it's nothing."

"Tch! Like hell it isn't!"

When Terra tried deflecting the question with some idiotic excuse, Ryuko stamped out his miserable efforts. *Hard*. Before the guy could blink, she reached out and grabbed the front of his shirt. Her fingers latched around his suspenders, gripping right where they met. Their eyes locked. And with a considerable show of strength, she pulled him closer, making the large difference between their respective heights more apparent, "Whenever you mention Aqua, you get all weird and depressed! So, either you tell me what happened... or I'm going to make you tell me, got it!?"

She wasn't uncaring by any stretch of the word. Every day she didn't find Satsuki, Mako or anyone else was horrible. Her life since Vanitas destroyed her world was one long miserable nightmare. But it was knowing she would never gonna see Senketsu again... never hear his voice or get into arguments about her diet and weight... that constantly tore at her heart. That was a pain that never ended. Sometimes, she had dreams. Half-formed memories of that final battle. And every time that happened, she woke up calling out his

name. As if everything that happened since Ragyo Kiryuin's death was nothing more than a fancy dream.

"It's... hard to explain."

But Terra was different.

No matter what happened between him and Aqua, they were still friends. He could go home and know they would be there waiting for him. And like *hell* was she going to let either of them experience that same agonizing pain.

"Then start talking."

Her fingers tightened around Terra's suspenders, "I've got plenty of time."

"Ryuko, do you remember Burmecia?"

The question took her off guard. She hadn't expected Terra to ask something so strange. For a moment, her grip loosened as she wracked her brain for an answer. She searched Terra's expression. But when that proved pointless, just as quickly as they relaxed, her fingers clenched into a fist around the red straps, "Yeah, we kicked that stupid Heartless's ass! But what's that got to do with Aqua?"

"Master Eraqus doesn't believe I'm strong enough to keep the darkness within my heart under control."

Despite his best efforts, Terra found himself stumbling over the words. He bit the inside of his cheek, filling his mouth with the faint taste of copper, "He thinks I'm too weak. That, one day, I'll succumb to darkness. That's why... because Master Eraqus doesn't trust the strength of my heart... he ordered Aqua to spy on me."

Ryuko *felt* herself growing numb at the confession. Her hand slipped from Terra's suspenders, falling limply to her side. And with her heart

skipping a beat, gnashed her teeth together into an enraged snarl, "Say what!?"

"I don't understand..."

Terra trembled as he stared at his hands. At the terrible things he'd done. Even now, the memory of Maleficent's manipulations was seared into his mind. He'd been conscious throughout those horrifying seconds. From the moment she used her magic, he'd resisted with every ounce of strength in his heart. But the light hadn't been enough. It had only forced the sorceress into using her full power, something Maleficent had found vexing. In the end, he had been too weak to stand against his own darkness.

And the memories... those terrifying images of watching Aurora's heart float away, only to be captured by Maleficent... were never going to fade, no matter how much he tried moving forward.

"One slip and suddenly he doesn't trust me?"

He clenched his hands, grimacing between gnashed teeth as emotion bled into his voice, "He's my Master! I'm his student! I would do anything to make him proud! None of this makes sense! And Aqua..."

With a breathless sigh, Terra felt his anger dissipate, replaced by a deep and unfathomable sadness, "After everything we've been through, I thought she would understand I'm nothing like Ardyn Izunia. She's my friend. Or at least, I thought she was. Aqua... she should have known I'd find another way to control the darkness in my heart. That I would figure everything out on my own terms. I thought she would trust me."

His voice lowered to a strained whisper, "But I guess she's afraid of my darkness, just like Master Eraqus."

Ryuko listened to Terra's confession.

And in the moments that followed, a tick developed over her right eye. Something quickly followed by her mouth twisting into a petulant frown, "On my god, you're a freaking idiot!"

Terra's head snapped upwards, "What -"

["Just to be clear! I ain't sayin' I agree with your Master! Because I don't!"](#)

Without caring in the slightest about manners, respect or any other nonsense, she interrupted Terra's childish whining. Her voice carried across the plaza as she cocked her head sideways and huffed. Maybe she was being rude. Hell, there was a good chance Terra was gonna hate her guts after she was finished laying into him. But she didn't care about that. Because the way he was talking about Aqua reminded her of Mako. It brought back unsettling memories of the Fight Club and everything that happened during those weeks. And *that* wasn't right.

"And the same goes for Aqua spying on you!"

She knew relationships weren't simple or clear-cut. They were really complicated and difficult. Even people that normally got along sometimes fought. She couldn't count the number of times she and Mako argued over the remote, what movie to watch, how much to eat or whether she should stop beating the crap out of Honnouji Academy dipshits. But this? She didn't need a fancy degree to know something really bad happened between Terra and Aqua, "It probably sounds awfully bad in your head. You gotta be thinkin' Aqua doesn't give a rat's ass about your feelings."

Her voice softened as she looked away, lower lips drawn into her mouth, "But to me, it sorta feels like she really cares about you."

Terra tried answering only for Ryuko to continue talking.

"Look, I don't know much about you or Aqua."

Just like the first time, she cut off Terra's excuse without missing a beat. Before he could say anything - hell, even turn around and walk away - she folded her arms and scoffed. With the breeze whispering through the gardens causing her feathery hair to gently rustle, she stared into his eyes and glowered, "Maybe I'm getting a lot of things wrong. It wouldn't be the first time. But that doesn't matter! Because like it or not, Aqua's your friend! She's the person you'd do anything to protect! Even if it meant running headlong into darkness."

Mako's smile flashed through her mind.

The overwhelming happiness she remembered in Mako's eyes caused her heart to twitch. It made her lose track of what she was saying. Her thoughts became jumbled. And for a quick moment, she lost her train of thought. She wanted nothing more than to find Satsuki and Mako. They were the lights of her life. Because even after all this time... even after learning to use magic and making new friends... that unbearable loneliness would forever be etched onto her heart. Only now, after it was too late, she finally understood why her dad had been so distant and cold. And why he sent her off to boarding school. But those years had been *hell*. She hadn't made a single friend. Nobody cared enough about her to talk, let alone eat lunch with her.

It had been a miserable hell only made worse when Nui Harime murdered him in front of her eyes.

Then she met Mako. Or maybe, it was the other way around.

And just like that, she'd started feeling happy about lots of things.

"That's why I know how you feel!"

It took effort keeping her voice steady. She bit the inside of her cheek, letting the pain clear her mind. And only after getting herself under control, when she wasn't about to break down or something stupid, did she force out the words, "Your heart says you can't trust

anyone. That they can't possibly understand what you're going through, right?"

Terra *wanted* to disagree, but he found himself sighing, "Yeah -"

"I ain't finished!"

One final time, she interrupted Terra, "That's why I *know*, whatever you're plannin' on doing, unless you talk with Aqua, the problem ain't going away. It's gonna get worse. Trust me on this. Ignoring your problems by acting like a hard-ass doesn't fix anything!"

A strange feeling tickled the back of her mind. And without thinking, she grabbed Terra's shirt, pulling him closer, "So, like I've been saying, I don't know why you're suddenly worried about the darkness inside your heart. If you don't want to tell me, that's fine! But even if you want to clam up, you gotta talk with Aqua. Because no matter how terrible it feels... she's still your friend!"

Terra didn't know what to say.

But as much as he wanted, he couldn't find the courage to argue with Ryuko. Because deep in his heart, she was absolutely right. Not just about talking with Aqua, but about everything she said. With a painful swallow, he ignored the bile growing in the back of his throat. If he hadn't been so goddamn stupid, things would have been different. If Aqua had been following him across the worlds, she already knew about Maleficent and Aurora's heart. And the unwilling role he played. It was no wonder she'd been so worried. Why she thought he must have succumbed to darkness. If their roles were reversed, he would have thought the same thing about her.

She had simply been trying to watch his back.

And he'd lashed out without giving her the chance to explain anything.

"I... thanks, Ryuko."

The atmospheric silence was deafening as he nodded, "About Aqua... about everything... you're right."

"Damn right I am!"

Ryuko pushed herself away from Terra, letting go of his shirt only after he seemed to get her point, "Now why are you here?"

"Oh that..."

He frowned as everything snapped back together. The main reason he came to the outer gardens. How he ran into Ryuko. Everything. It came flooding back into his heart. And with an exasperated sigh, he rubbed his neck, "It sounds strange, but after defeating that Unversed, I ran into some guy claiming to have captured Master Xehanort."

"You're kidding me!"

The disbelief in Ryuko's voice was matched only by her glaring suspicion, "I know the guy's old, but how the hell could some random asshole take him down?"

"I don't believe it either, but there's no harm checking things out," Terra looked around the empty plaza, eyes sweeping from fountain to flower beds, before adding, "If he was telling the truth, Master Xehanort's somewhere underneath the outer gardens."

"Leave saving his wrinkly ass to me!"

The promise escaped before she had the chance to think about whether throwing herself head-first into a trap was a good idea. Her record wasn't exactly perfect. But a stomp of her foot pushed those thoughts to the darkest corner of her mind, "I seriously doubt he's down there. It sounds too goddamn convenient. But it's not like I have anything better to do. I'll spring this guy's stupid trap, kick his ass and be back in time for lunch."

After taking a moment to think things over, she blinked, snorted and belatedly added, “Besides, you have more important shit to worry about!”

It took Terra barely a second to understand what Ryuko was saying.

“Thanks!”

Terra couldn’t express *how* grateful he was. All he could do was grin at Ryuko, thank her in the simplest way possible, before running back into town. And with every step... every leap and controlled skid around street corners... he realized she’d been right. He had been walking into a trap. After all, what were the chances some random thug managed to capture a man like Master Xehanort, who defeated a Hunter of the Dark without breaking a sweat? It was ridiculous even thinking about it. And yet, one thing still troubled him. A strange thought in the back of his mind.

The thug had known his name.

For a moment, he considered turning around.

But he gnashed his teeth, swallowed his nervousness and continued sprinting forward without regret. Even if Master Xehanort really was in trouble, Ryuko was more than strong enough to rescue him. Her heart was strong. She survived Vanitas destroying her world. She stood against Ardyn Izunia’s terrible darkness without backing down. And not one... not even when she was at her lowest... did she succumb to darkness. Someone like her, who had faith in him, wouldn’t lose against a cowardly and heartless thug.

Not when she gave him this chance to fix his mistakes.

“Aqua... Ven... hold on...”

Last edited: Aug 14, 2018

Chapter 7.1

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 7 - Not Your Kind of People

["Xehanort better be here..."](#)

Ryuko could feel her mood worsening by the second. She'd long passed simple annoyance and was rapidly approaching goddamn frustration. But as she looked around, eyes sweeping back and forth for anything out of the ordinary, her eyebrow twitched. Right before dragging a hand down her face. What the hell did she know about ordinary? Nothing about her life was ordinary! Grumbling under her breath, curses mixed alongside incoherent mumbles, she leaned over the side of the platform and spat.

If this was a trap, it wasn't a very good one.

Clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth, she jabbed both hands deep into her jacket. The asshole must have bluffed Terra. It was the only explanation. No freaking way some thug captured Xehanort. And after coming all the way down, having gotten lost several times and been forced to backtrack only to get lost again, she was pissed off. It would have been better heading back to town with Terra instead of wasting most of her morning on this stupid side quest.

"Ugh..."

The sound of her groan echoed over the rushing waters.

What a goddamn waste of time! And it was all for nothing! Running a hand through her hair, shoulders slouched and mentally berating herself, Ryuko went over her options. There was no point sticking around. Maybe if she hurried back to town, she could catch Aqua,

Ven and Terra. Hopefully after they patched up their friendship. And if. Terra was still struggling to say what was on his heart? Well, she was capable, and quite willing, of physically, or otherwise, pushing things along.

"Screw this!"

Dragging her foot off the ground, she pivoted on the spot. But before taking a single step, Ryuko saw something - or rather, someone - chained to a large pipe high on the wall.

"Alright, maybe the guy wasn't bluffing!"

How the hell could some random asshole beat the crap out of the guy, drag his body underneath Radiant Garden and find Terra without raising suspicion? Even if he was old, Xehanort was still a Keyblade Master. No way could anyone take him down without a major fight! Without wasting any more time thinking, Ryuko sprinted towards the imprisoned master, ruby stars flickering around her fingers. This was probably a goddamn setup. Or now that she thought about it, *this* was the trap the asshole planned for Terra. It was obvious to anyone with half a brain.

"Now isn't this quite the surprise..."

She heard the faint whistling moments before impact. Her foot instinctively left the ground, dragging the rest of her body backwards as the arrow exploded into shards of magic. Turning around and glancing back up the stairs at the condescending and mocking voice, Ryuko snorted under her breath, "Who the hell are you?"

As the guy stepped out of the shadows like he owned the place, smoke trailing from the arrowgun in his left hand, the first thing she noticed was his uniform. It was the same dark slate grey jacket and pants combo worn by the two guards back at Hollow Bastion. Which meant this bastard either worked for the big shot in charge of Radiant Garden or he somehow stole one of their uniforms. Both choices sucked. Because with his slicked-back hair, tattered red

scarf and cocky grin, the guy looked like a goddamn asshole. Someone she wouldn't hesitate to punch before giving the finger and then kicking him in the balls.

"This is a restricted area, you know."

The man leaned over the railing, narrowed eyes staring straight into her own, "Mind explaining what you're doing here?"

"None of your goddamn business!"

A weak groan assaulted her heart when she noticed Xehanort starting to regain consciousness. Refusing to give the annoying bastard another second of her valuable time, Ryuko frowned at the bruise underneath the old man's left eye. It was a sickly purplish-yellow color that clashed with his tanned skin. Without thinking, she rushed forward, intent on cutting Xehanort down.

Only to immediately backpedal when another arrow exploded inches from her sneakers.

"Ah, not so fast."

Tossing the crossbow into the air before catching it, the condescending guard chuckled, "Don't know who you are... frankly, I really couldn't care less... but I'm afraid you're not getting anywhere near the old coot."

For a moment, Ryuko's fingers twitched, "You're the bastard who kidnapped Xehanort, aren't you!?"

Braig was baffled.

Underneath his suave confidence, he was confused. Who the hell was this girl? She wasn't part of the old coot's master plans. It had been bad enough when Ansem changed their patrols after that six-armed freak stole Tournesol from underneath their noses. And then mocked them. But contrary to perfectly normal expectations,

Xehanort hadn't been upset. Maybe a little peeved or annoyed. Nothing like the fire and brimstone he'd anticipated.

As a matter of fact, the geezer claimed Gilgamesh's 'grand theft' only made things easier.

How, he had no idea. At this point, he was going with the flow. Following directions to reach the end without any comments or feedback. Nothing relatively new.

Which brought him back to the all-important question - who the hell was this girl?

Their plan called for Terra to 'rescue,' with capital quotes, Xehanort. Not some random teenager with a streak of dyed hair off the streets. How was she even down here? Getting through the gates required a special pass. Something most ordinary burglars couldn't pick. Of course, relatively simple for anyone with one of those fancy Keyblades. And upon coming to such a conclusion, Braig feigned boredom, lazily bouncing the arrowgun against his shoulder, index finger never quite leaving the trigger.

He was supposed to fight Terra... make the brat accept darkness... and retreat when things got too hot.

But this?

Ignoring the strange feeling in the pit of his stomach, he carefully glanced at the old coot listening to their conversation. If this was part of Xehanort's plan, something kept under wraps for a very special occasion, no point tricking himself into a panic.

When the geezer's eyes narrowed just enough for him to get the message, he rolled his shoulders and smirked.

"Well, aren't you sharp..."

He aimed the arrowgun at the blabbering old coot while descending the stairs, purposely keeping his pace to an agonizingly slow march, "But let me tell ya, the geezer certainly knows how to take punishment. Just like I know how to dish it out."

As the threat achieved its purpose - gaining the girl's undivided attention - his grin faded into a disgusted grimace, "Not the most polite way of doing things... but hey, it made everything real easy, if you catch my drift."

Ryuko had heard enough.

She didn't know how an asshole punk like this guy kidnapped Xehanort, but that only meant kicking his ass was priority number one. Snorting under her breath as she reached over her shoulder, fingers looping around the Scissor Blade, she took a single step forward, daring the bastard to shoot, "You're awfully confident for a guy about to have his face shoved through the ground!"

"Ooh... real scary..."

Braig almost rolled his eyes.

Was this girl seriously threatening him with a sword? Quite frankly, he was insulted. As far as he was concerned, unless she somehow pulled a Keyblade out of thin air, which any old keyslinger would have already done, he could handle whatever tricks she had up her sleeves.

"Ah! Not so fast!"

The arrowgun snapped downwards when the teenager tried rushing up the stairs. And, by proxy, through him. With nothing more than a slight squeeze, an arrow shot forth. And Braig smirked at the frustration building deep inside her heart, "You really think I'd risk fighting a genuine keyslinger without a plan? As if! I'm not the sort of person to fight fair. Not when it comes to something like this. For example, take another look at the old coot."

A quick jerk of his thumb towards the imprisoned Keyblade Master got the point across, "One wrong move and he goes *boom*."

If looks could kill, Ryuko would have already smashed the bastard through the nearest wall. His goddamn voice was freaking annoying! Her fingers twitched. It wouldn't take much to unsheathe the Scissor Blade. And she was fairly certain... maybe eighty or ninety percent... she could reach the asshole before whatever magic or bombs were planted around Xehanort exploded. But despite the anger and irritation blossoming in her heart, she remained calm.

Exceptionally so.

Stumbling to an awkward halt after taking only four steps, she glared at the guard, lips twisted into a contemptuous snarl, "You son of a bitch!"

"Geez, watch the language."

He wasn't the best person to criticism someone's choice of language. But did she have to curse every other goddamn sentence? Still, there was good news. The impromptu bluff appeared to have worked. Which gave him time to organize his thoughts and come up with a better plan. With a half-cocked grin stretching across his face, he raised the arrowgun until it pointed squarely between her eyes. He didn't know how Xehanort pulled it off. Improvising wasn't exactly easy. And under stress? Forget about it. No matter how hard he tried, he would always be someone better suited for taking orders than giving them.

But hey, life was full of obstacles.

"Anyway, if you don't want Xehanort to kick the bucket a few years ahead of schedule, you're gonna find Terra and tell him to come back."

With a faint *click*, he swept his arm towards the master, "And no funny business. I see anyone *besides* Terra walk through these

doors and the old coot dies. Understand?"

"And if I don't?"

Braig almost sputtered, "Don't you care about the geezer's life?"

"That wasn't a question, dipshit."

Spitting out the thick wad building in the back of her throat onto the ground, Ryuko tightened her fingers around the sheathed Scissor Blade. Her knuckles bled white. The tendons and muscles in her forearm popped. And with another glance at Xehanort, who was still a little woozy, she carefully weighed her options, "What I meant was... I ain't leaving no matter what you say. Hope that doesn't ruin your plans!"

"Ruin? As if!"

This was just terrific.

No question about the answer. Whether he liked it or not, the old coot's plan was ruined. And things were only getting more screwed up by the second. Which complicated pretty much everything. If this hot-headed punk thought she could call his bluff, then fine. Let her call it. He needed to buy more time anyway. Sure, he could fight her. It would be hard. One or two shots to the arms and legs and *bam!* She's out for the count. But anyone willing to fight despite his intentions to assassinate Xehanort wasn't right in the head.

And that was troubling.

"Say..."

Deciding to take a random shot in the dark, he twirled the arrowgun around his index finger before catching it, "... you wouldn't happen to be one of those keyslingers, would you?"

"Tch! As if!"

Ryuko latched onto the bastard's suspicious interest in the Keyblade. If the guy wanted Terra badly enough to capture Xehanort... *and* he already knew about the Keyblade... telling him anything would be stupid. Even Mako would have the common sense to keep her mouth shut. But this guy not knowing about her, since he expected Terra to save the old man, gave her the homefield advantage.

One she was gonna use to her heart's content.

"I have something even better!"

Alongside an audible *sheen* as light sliced upon the razor-sharp Life Fibers woven and pressed into hardened metal, she drew the crimson blade sheathed on her back. In a vicious burst of motion, the Scissor Blade rapidly spun around her wrist, missing her neck and other parts of her body by mere inches. It was nothing more than a blur to the naked eye. Something a lot of people couldn't track, not even with magic. And with one final grunt, a primordial expression promising infinite pain and suffering, she caught the Scissor Blade, locked her elbow and pointed it straight at the bastard, "This right here is the Scissor Blade!"

"Scissor Blade, huh?"

Braig had to admit, the Scissor Blade, or whatever she called it, looked pretty damn cool. Sleek. Stylish. And an edge sharp enough that it was audibly *singing*, "Gotta say, didn't expect you to pull out something like that. Heh, might have to actually put some effort into beating you."

It took everything to condense her disgust towards the ridiculous bluff into a derisive snort, "Keep talking! It ain't gonna save you from _."

"Ryuko! You mustn't allow this ruffian to win!"

The raspy voice came out of the blue, cutting through the haze of annoyance, frustration and irritation fogging her heart, "Thanks for

the advice, but I kinda already figured that out."

"You don't understand!"

Xehanort struggled against the chains latching him to the pipe, "This dishonorable goon somehow learned powerful magic! If you don't stop him, this world and everyone on it will be in terrible danger!"

"Say what!?"

"The threat of countless innocent deaths was how he captured me," Xehanort grimaced shamefully, "It's how he intended to defeat Terra! You mustn't allow the same fate to happen to you! Steady your heart and strike him down! Stop this ruffian before his insane lust for power destroys this world!"

Braig couldn't make heads or tails of the old coot's improvising. Since when did he have an insane lust for power and access to world-shattering magic? Was this part of the master plan or something Xehanort just came up with? Because if Ryuko or whatever her name was called his bluff, he was going to be in a world of trouble. But he couldn't complain. If the geezer wanted her to believe he was hellbent on destroying Radiant Garden for some stupid reason, there wasn't any harm in playing along.

"Well... looks like the cat's out of the bag."

As he descended the final steps to the platform, a second arrowgun materialized in his left hand, "Like the old coot spoiled, this whole world's my hostage. All I need to do is snap my fingers and *presto!* Boom! [Everyone dies! Pretty neat, huh?](#)"

Maybe it was the light playing tricks on his eyes. Or perhaps he was overreacted. But something flickered against his heart. The teenager had gone awfully silent. After all that bragging about destroying Radiant Garden, he expected her to lash out. Perhaps even launch herself forward in some desperate yet foolhardy attempt at stopping him. The predictable actions of heroes. But she hadn't said a single

word since his 'insane and evil plan' was spoiled by the old coot playing weak and helpless.

And he wasn't quite sure - hell, nothing since the original plan involving Terra went off the rails made sense - but hadn't her terrible dye job been limited to a single bang?

"Gonna be honest with you, Ryuko. I've always wanted to know what happens when you destroy a world."

With his grin stretching from ear to ear, he hefted the twin arrowguns until they framed his face, "Kind of... what was the phrase... a morbid curiosity, if you catch my drift."

"... is that right?"

Ryuko couldn't stand looking at the son of bitch.

All she could hear... echoing over and over in her mind... was *his* laughter as Heartless swarmed her world's keyhole.

"What you're REALLY sayin' is..."

Everything faded into the background as she raised the Scissor Blade. While the currently not-so-smug asshole stepped backwards, eyes narrowed and the first genuine trace of surprise on his face, her other arm snapped outwards, fingers grasping at nothingness. Her head hung forward, feathery bangs obscuring the sharpened incisors pressing against her lip. And with nothing more than a brief, yet intense, eruption of crimson stars, she pulled at the light dwelling inside her heart.

"... if I kill you, Radiant Garden's gonna be safe, right?"

The menacing question sent shivers racing down his spine. But it was the Keyblade, something he *hadn't* expected, that caused his heart to skip a beat. A Keyblade? Since when did she have a goddamn Keyblade? Acting quickly, colors, sounds and light itself

faded into darkness as he slipped into the space between worlds. A blink of an eye and he was gone, stumbling to regain his balance upon the ledge across the purification facility from the platform.

Less than a second before the Scissor Blade and Keyblade enclosed around his neck.

"Shit!"

Involuntarily swallowing the lump in his throat, he shook his head, dissipating the adrenaline causing his fingers to twitch. Damn it! This wasn't part of the plan! This wasn't how things were supposed to be going. If he'd been slightly slower, his head and body would be falling in two different directions.

Alright, it was time to cut his losses. Fighting Terra was one thing, but this pissed-off keyslinger? Not a chance. He needed to escape before -

His cheek twitched at Xehanort's unflinching gaze.

"You really want to do this, huh?"

It wasn't his first choice. Or his second. Not by a long shot. But he'd play the geezer's game. At least until everything was settled and he had the chance to *speak* with Xehanort. Maybe he was overestimated Ryuko. Sure, she had a Keyblade and was faster than expected, but he had something most new keyslingers did. And that was experience. As long as he remained out of her range and didn't do anything stupid, there was no way he could lose.

"Keyblade or not, you're not going to beat me!"

His voice echoed across the spacious facility as he raised both arrowguns and *snapped* them together. With a twist of his wrist, Braig connected machinery and magic. Mechanical parts combined until he was holding a sniper rifle. The action drew the girl's undivided attention. Which made teleporting to another location

along the wall, one eye already staring through the scope at the back of her head, all the more satisfying.

"Now kiss your sorry ass goodbye!"

Original Version

["Xehanort better be here..."](#)

Ryuko's mood worsened from simple annoyance to freaking irritation as she looked around, eyes sweeping back and forth for anything out of the ordinary. Something that, upon second thought, caused her eyebrow to twitch. What the hell did she know about ordinary? Nothing about her life was ordinary! Grumbling under her breath, curses mixed alongside incoherent mumbling, she continued marching across the platform.

If this was a trap, it wasn't a very good one.

"Tch!"

Clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth, she jabbed both hands deep into her jacket. No freaking way some thug managed to capture Xehanort! The asshole must have bluffed to Terra. It was the only explanation. And after coming down, having gotten lost several times and been forced to backtrack only to get lost again, she felt like a complete idiot. It would have been better to head back to town with Terra instead of wasting most of her morning on this stupid side trip.

"Ugh..."

She threw her head back and groaned loudly enough for the sound to echo off the walls.

What a goddamn waste of time! And all for nothing! Running a hand through her hair, Ryuko went over her options. There wasn't any point sticking around. Maybe if she hurried back to town, she could still meet Aqua, Ven and Terra. Hopefully after they patched

things up. And if Terra was still struggling to say what's on his heart? Well, she was more than capable of pushing things along.

Dragging her right foot off the ground, Ryuko lazily pivoted on the spot.

But before she managed taking a single step, she saw something - or rather, someone, chained to a large pipe high on the wall.

"Alright, maybe the guy wasn't bluffing!"

Her eyes widened at the unexpected discovery. Even if he was old and crippled, Xehanort was powerful. How the hell could some random asshole beat the crap out of the guy, drag his body underneath Radiant Garden *and* find Terra without raising suspicion? Without thinking, Ryuko lurched forward, bounding across the platform, prepared to materialize Threadcutter at a moment's notice. The idea that finding Xehanort was a setup never crossed her mind. Or rather, it *did*. But she knew better than anyone that springing the bastard's trap and getting things started was the best way to kick his ass.

"This is quite the surprise..."

She instinctively leapt backwards right before the magical arrow exploded into shards of darkness. Her ears picked up the whistling moments before impact. Her heart felt the incoming darkness. It gave her enough time to avoid embarrassing herself. The brief window of opportunity made it possible to backpedal, regain her bearings, and scream at the bastard strutting into the facility.

"Who the hell are you?"

As the guy stepped out of the shadows like he owned the place, the first thing Ryuko noticed was his uniform. It was familiar. Almost too familiar. It was the same dark slate grey jacket and pants combo worn by the two idiots back at the castle. Which meant this bastard was either working for the big shot in charge of Radiant Garden or

he stole their uniform. Pivoting sharply, she resisted giving the asshole the finger. With his slicked-back hair, tattered red scarf and annoying voice, the guy looked like a freaking prick. Someone she wouldn't hesitate to punch.

Even the strange crossbow propped against his shoulder didn't stop her knuckles from cracking.

"This is a restricted area, you know."

The man leaned over the railing, narrowed eyes staring straight into her own, "Mind explaining what you're doing here?"

"None of your goddamn business!"

A faint groan assaulted her heart when she noticed Xehanort regaining consciousness. Refusing to give the bastard guard another second of her time, Ryuko noticed the wizened master's eyes fluttering open. The bruise underneath his cheek was a sickly purplish-yellow as amber eyes locked with hers. Just like the first time, she tried rescuing him, having already pushed the asshole to the farthest corner of her mind.

Only to backpedal when another arrow illuminated by darkness to explode against the ground inches from her feet.

"Ah, not so fast."

Tossing the crossbow into the air before catching it, the guard scoffed, "I don't know who you are... but I'm afraid you're not getting anywhere near the old coot."

Ryuko's fingers momentarily twitched, "You're the asshole who kidnapped Xehanort, aren't you!?"

Braig was baffled.

This wasn't part of the geezer's grand scheme. It was bad enough Ansem changed the patrols after that six-armed freak stole

Tournesol from underneath their noses. And telling the old coot hadn't been fun. At least, that had been his expectation. But contrary to belief, Xehanort hadn't been upset. Maybe a little peeved or annoyed by the complications, but nothing like the fire and brimstone he'd anticipated from such an expert connoisseur of darkness. As a matter of fact, the geezer laughed, claiming Gilgamesh, or whatever the thief's name was, only made things easier.

So then, who was this girl?

Their plan called for Terra to 'save' Xehanort, not some random teenager. What the hell was a punk with a single streak of dyed hair even doing here? Getting through the gates required a special key, not something any ordinary burglar could pick. Feigning boredom, Braig lazily bounced the arrowgun against his shoulder, fingers never leaving the trigger. After going through all that trouble with a phony kidnapping story, things weren't looking so good.

He was supposed to fight Terra... make the brat accept darkness... and retreat when things got too hot. Upon which, as promised, the geezer would make him a real keyslinger.

A win-win situation.

Ignoring the strange feeling in the pit of his stomach, he carefully glanced at the old coot listening to their conversation. Who the hell knew how the geezer through? If this girl appearing instead of Terra was part of Xehanort's scheme, who was he to judge? As long as he got a Keyblade of his own, he'd go along with whatever the bastard was planning.

When Xehanort's eyes narrowed just enough for him to get the message, Braig smirked.

"Well, aren't you sharp..."

He aimed the arrowgun at the blabbering old coot while descending the stairs, purposely keeping his pace to an agonizingly slow march, "But let me tell ya, the geezer certainly knows how to take punishment. Just like I know how to dish it out."

As the underlying threat faded into the surrounding facility, Braig's grin faded into a grimace, "Not the most polite way of doing things... but hey, it made things real easy, if you catch my drift."

Ryuko had heard enough.

She didn't need to keep listening to the asshole's taunts to get the point! Against all odds, he was the guy who kidnapped Xehanort. And that meant kicking his ass was priority number one! With a derisive snort, which only pissed the bastard off, she reached over her shoulder, fingers looping around the Scissor Blade, "You're awfully confident for a guy whose about to have his face smashed into the ground!"

"Ooh... real scary..."

Braig almost rolled his eyes.

Was she seriously threatening him with a sword? As if! Quite frankly, he was insulted. As far as he was concerned, unless the teenager pulled a Keyblade out of thin air, he could handle whatever tricks she had up her sleeves.

"Ah! Not so fast!"

The arrowgun snapped downwards when the teenager tried rushing up the stairs. And, by proxy, through him. Slightly depressing the trigger, Braig smirked at the impotent frustration in her eyes, "You really think I'd risk fighting a genuine keyslinger without a plan? As if! I'm not the sort of person to fight fair. Not when it comes to something like this. For example, take another look at the old coot."

A quick jerk of his thumb towards the imprisoned Keyblade Master got the point across, "One wrong move and he goes *boom*."

If looks could kill, Ryuko would have already smashed the bastard through the nearest wall. His goddamn voice was freaking annoying! Her fingers twitched. It wouldn't take much to unsheathe the Scissor Blade. And she was fairly certain... maybe eighty or ninety percent... she could reach the asshole before whatever magic or bombs were planted around Xehanort exploded. But despite the anger and irritation blossoming in her heart, she remained calm.

Exceptionally so.

Stumbling to an awkward halt after taking only four steps, she glared at the guard, lips twisted into a contemptuous snarl, "You son of a bitch!"

"Geez, watch the language."

He wasn't the best person to criticize anyone's choice of language, but did she have to curse every other sentence? Still, there was some good news. The impromptu bluff appeared to have worked. Which gave him time to organize his thoughts. A moment passed. And then another. And with a cocky grin, he raised the arrowgun until it was aimed squarely between her eyes. He didn't know how Xehanort constantly pulled it off. Improvising on the spot wasn't easy. One slip... one confused detail or lie... and everything falls apart. It was a seriously dangerous gamble.

But hey, life was full of obstacles.

"Anyway, if you don't want the geezer to kick the bucket a few years early, you're gonna find Terra and tell him to come back here. Alone."

A faint *clicked* reverberated across the platform when he swept his arm backwards, aiming the arrowgun squarely between Xehanort's

eyes, "Got it?"

"And if I don't?"

Braig almost sputtered, "Don't you care about the old coot's life?"

"That wasn't a question."

Ryuko's fingers tightened around the sheathed Scissor Blade until they bled white. God damn it, how stupid was this guy? Even Mako would have realized she was being sarcastic from the first syllable. It was freaking obvious! And this guy didn't catch it? Spitting out the thick wad in her mouth onto the ground, she glanced at Xehanort and weighed her options before snorting, "What I meant was... I ain't leaving no matter what you're gonna do! Hope that doesn't ruin your plans!"

"Ruin? As if!"

This was just terrific.

Whether he liked it or not, the old coot's plan was shot. And things were getting more off-track by the second. Which complicated everything. If the hot-headed punk was going to call his bluff, he needed to buy time. Sure, he could fight her. It wouldn't be hard. A few well-placed shots and *bam!* She's lying on the ground with a hole in her head. But anyone willing to fight despite his threat to blow up the old coot wasn't right in the head.

"Say..."

Deciding to take another shot in the dark, Braig twirled the arrowgun around his finger before catching it, "... you wouldn't happen to be one of those keyslingers, would you?"

"Tch! As if!"

Ryuko latched onto the bastard's suspicious interest in the Keyblade. Glaring at the smug asshole, her grip tightened around

the Scissor Blade. If the guy wanted Terra badly enough to capture Xehanort... *and* he already knew about the Keyblade... telling him anything would be goddamn stupid. But him not know anything about *her*, since he expected Terra to come save the old man, gave her an unfair advantage.

One she was gonna use to her heart's content.

"I have something even better!"

Alongside an audible *sheen* as light sliced upon the razor-sharp Life Fibers woven and pressed into hardened metal, she drew the crimson blade sheathed on her back. In a vicious burst of motion, the Scissor Blade spun around her wrist, missing her neck other parts of her body by mere inches. It was a blur to the naked eye. Something most people couldn't track, even with magic. And with an angry snarl promising nothing but endless pain and suffering, she caught the Scissor Blade, locked her elbow, and pointed it straight at the bastard, "This right here is the Scissor Blade!"

"Scissor Blade, huh?"

Braig had to admit, the Scissor Blade, or whatever she called it, looked pretty damn cool. Sleek. Stylish. And an edge sharp enough that it was audibly *singing*, "Gotta say, didn't expect you to pull out something like that. Heh, might have to actually put some effort into beating you."

Ryuko snorted at the ridiculous bluff, "Oh yeah? Let's see you keep talking after I finish wiping the floor with your sorry ass!"

"Ryuko! You mustn't allow this ruffian to win!"

The raspy voice came out of the blue, cutting through the haze of annoyance, frustration and irritation fogging her heart. But without looking away from the bastard, she rolled her eyes and returned fire, "Yeah, kinda already figured that out!"

“No! You don’t understand!”

Xehanort struggled against the thick chains latching him to the pipe, “This dishonorable goon somehow came across powerful magic! If you don’t stop him, Radiant Garden will be in terrible danger!”

Her mouth twitched, “Say what!?”

“The threat of countless innocent deaths was how he captured me,” Xehanort grimaced shamefully, “It’s how he intended to defeat Terra! You must not allow the same thing to happen to you! Steady your heart and strike him down! Stop this ruffian before his insanity destroys this world!”

Braig *still* couldn’t make heads or tails of the old coot’s scheme. Sure, he could warp between several points. But that was about his limit. Anything involving actual magic was out of his league. And if the girl called his bluff, he was going to be in some serious trouble. Still, he couldn’t really complain. Xehanort got him this far. So, if the geezer wanted the teenager to believe he was hellbent on destroying Radiant Garden in some insane quest for power, he might as well continue playing along.

“Well... looks like the cat’s out of the bag.”

As he descended the final steps to the platform, a second arrowgun materialized in his left hand, “Like the old coot spoiled, this whole world’s my hostage. All I need to do is snap my fingers and *presto!* Boom! [Everyone dies!](#)”

Maybe it was the light playing tricks on his eyes. No matter what anyone claimed, this place always did give him the creeps. But something definitely flickered against his heart. It sent shivers racing down his spine. Ever since Xehanort butted into their conversation with the weird explanation of him wanting to destroy Radiant Garden, the teenager had gone awfully silent. He had expected her to lash out. Maybe even launch herself forward in

some desperate and foolhardy attempt at stopping him. Something predictable. But she hadn't said a single word since his 'big plan' was spoiled by the old coot.

And he wasn't quite sure - hell, nothing since the original plan went to hell made sense - but Braig could have also sworn her terrible dye job had been limited to a single bang.

"To be honest, I've always wanted to know what happens when you destroy a world."

Dual *clicks* from the specialized arrowguns echoed sharply as his grin stretched from ear to ear, "Kind of... what was the phrase... a morbid curiosity, if you catch my drift."

"... is that right?"

Ryuko couldn't look at the son of a bitch.

All she could hear... bouncing over and over in her mind... was his threat.

And memories Heartless swarming the Keyhole underneath Ragyo Kiryuin's house slammed against her heart.

"What you're REALLY sayin' is..."

Everything faded into the background as she swung the Scissor Blade, releasing a burst of wind that forced the asshole to step backwards. Sharpened incisors pressed into her lower lip as her other arm snapped outwards, fingers grasping at nothingness. Her head hung forward, feathery bangs of hair obscuring her trembling eyes. Without so much as another word, she *clenched* her hand into a fist while pulling at the infinite strength dwelling inside her heart.

And alongside a brilliant flash of crimson stars, Threadcutter manifested into reality.

“... if I kill you, Radiant Garden will be safe, right?”

The words forced a purplish miasma from the darkest depths of Braig's heart. Reality pressed against his senses. Colors, sounds and the wind whispering against his face vanished into nothingness, draw out of the space between worlds, before returning in their entirety. And he stumbled, boots slipping against damp stone, before pivoting around, having instinctively warped across the purification facility in the blink of an eye.

A fraction of a second before the Scissor Blade and Keyblade enclosed around his neck.

“S-Shit!”

Adrenaline flooded his veins as Braig found himself standing on the ledge opposite Xehanort's relatively cozy prison, a few hundred feet of open air between him and the girl. Resting his fist against the alcove's edge, he glared viciously at the teenager. His fingers trembled, arrowgun quivering. Damn it! This wasn't part of the plan! He hadn't agreed to help the coot only to become collateral damage against a pissed off a deranged keyslinger! This wasn't how things were supposed to be going! If he'd been slightly slower, his head and body would be resting in two different places. Not to mention whatever the psychopathic Keyblade wielder intended with his heart.

Screw the Keyblade! He needed to cut his losses before -

Braig stiffened when Xehanort's unflinching gaze pierced his heart.

“You really want to do this?”

It wasn't his choice. Not by a long shot. But he'd play the old coot's game. At least, until things were good and settled. And with that said, he sneered at the vicious glare sent his way by the teenager. Oh, *she* was pissed? As if! *He* wasn't the goddamn psychopath! But that didn't matter! Even if the keyslinger was faster than

expected, he had the advantage. As long as he stayed out of her range and didn't do anything stupid, there was no way he could lose!

"Keyblade or not, you're not gonna beat me!"

His voice echoed across the spacious facility as he raised both arrowguns and *snapped* them together. With a twist of his wrist, Braig connected machinery and magic. Mechanical parts combined until he was holding a sniper rifle. The action drew the girl's undivided attention. Which made teleporting to another location along the wall, one eye already staring through the scope at the back of her head, all the more satisfying.

"Now kiss your sorry ass goodbye!"

Last edited: Jan 29, 2019

Chapter 7.2

It shouldn't take long to discern the main focus of this section. So, to clear things up, their current outfit - or perhaps I should say, a good visual approximation of what they're wearing in Kingdom Hearts - has been posted at the bottom inside spoiler tags.

[img:

[https://i.redditledia.com/WjpSpfLsoTBGY68s7p2vOqhTJfsdT6PTUDpS0kXbLnM.jpg?w=1024&s=d3dbed7b0bed41cba80bae6452bbbd95\]](https://i.redditledia.com/WjpSpfLsoTBGY68s7p2vOqhTJfsdT6PTUDpS0kXbLnM.jpg?w=1024&s=d3dbed7b0bed41cba80bae6452bbbd95)

Lindblum was yet another reminder of her shameful past.

Such an observation was readily apparent as she marched through the narrow streets, sweeping homes and residential shops as far as the eye could see. The industrious city, for it could not be described as anything but, was different from the other worlds. She walked alongside magic users clad in red, white, black and even blue, their specialties differentiated by their confidence and apparel. Nonhuman dressed in royal regalia emblazoned with foreign insignia and bearing halberds patrolled the streets, offering help and services to those who required such assistance. Soothing orange light flickered through storefronts, inviting potential patrons to take stock of their wares. Overhead, soaring through the stormy skies, airships dissimilar to anything she'd witnessed docked inside the towering central castle in a manner akin to puffin roosting within vertical cliffs.

Clack!

Her heeled boots tapped softly against cobblestone as lightning streaked through the heavens.

Yet despite the social stratification of the architecture, one that separated nobility and royalty from commoners, she couldn't sense the ever-present oppression which had clung to her former

conquests like an unsatisfied parasite. Even during inclement weather such as this, when one's heart and mind would be open to antagonism, she did not see heavy-handed guards searching for individuals discontent with the administration. Thieves and other criminals weren't strung from rafters as a warning to those wishing rebellion. Nobody feared retaliation for unwarranted criticism.

Rain began descending from the dreary heavens as she passed a tavern whose emblem bore resemblance to a snake-like dragon.

It started as infrequent pattering upon the ground. But soon enough, the storm grew increasingly heavy, the drizzle turning into downpour. And in response, she flipped the collar of her coat upwards. She tucked her hands into her pockets and continued forward, ignoring the maelstrom flooding the emptying streets. People were heading inside, seeking refuge from the pouring rain filling the streets, but her objective laid elsewhere. And an hour of waiting out the storm - no, several minutes - could be the difference between success and failure.

Sauntering into an open plaza, the standard patrol of guards having retreated in the face of nature, her eyes focused upon the Grand Castle. Or rather, what lay within the structure. Cid Fabool the Ninth's genius connected Lindblum with nine other worlds, some small and other significant. His achievement deserved accolades, but she sought not the man, but what his invention necessitated. Even upon another world, bureaucracy sustained itself upon the masses. It was an immortal creature bearing neither beginning nor end. An ouroboros. Yet with proper knowledge, one could twist such heinous power to their own means.

She simply needed to gain access to the central records and...

Water cascaded down long black hair when something whispered against her heart.

"Ryuko?"

Satsuki found herself at a loss for words. The familiar sensation was imperceptibly faint. It was akin to a breeze struggling against a hurricane. Or a pinprick of light silhouetted against the burning sun. But for the first time since the masked individual tore their world asunder... since she was cast into the chaotic darkness, left to fend for herself with naught but her own convictions, willpower and light to keep her heart intact... she had incontrovertible proof someone else survived. It invoked such enrapturing jubilation that she paid no attention towards the raging storm.

After failing again and again to find any traces of her sister, Gamagori, Jakuzure or the others, she finally knew, beyond any shadow of a doubt, Ryuko escaped that unending maelstrom of seething darkness.

Clack!

Another clack of her heeled boots accompanied the sudden about-face. Thick brows knitted together as she paused, consternation replacing exultation. Her hair, which had regrown into its former length over the intervening weeks, clung to her face.

The growing hope filling her heart could not conceal an important question, one that quickly encompassed her conscious mind. Why *now*? Ryuko had never been the sort of person who willingly obeyed social norms. Not unless there was something in it for her. Even before darkness consumed their world, Ryuko's belligerence, hot-headedness and unfiltered emotional responses made tracking her movements exceptionally easy. Something Inumuta commented upon multiple times, usually in the context of wasting millions of dollars on spying equipment that hadn't been necessary.

Clack!

Her footsteps displaced the large puddle growing in the street.

With the exception of Mankanshoku and, in somber remembrance, Senketsu, she understood Ryuko better than anyone. Her sister

most likely blamed herself for their world's untimely fate. It was misplaced guilt born from their inability to prevent the masked youth from destroying everything they cherished. The reaction was irrational. Something she, if things were different, would verbally berate. And yet, not a day passed where she didn't wonder how events might have unfolded had she dealt with the monstrous army more efficiently. Or perhaps accepted Gamagori's well-meaning request for assistance, allowing her to accompany Ryuko into the ruins beneath their mother's former manor.

But that merely beget the same question.

Why was she sensing her sister's unmistakable presence *now*? After more than a month, what made *now* different? It was a question that would force a lesser person's suspicions to the forefront of their heart. Their minds would be wracked by indecision as they futilely attempted discerning the reason behind such elusive questions.

And yet, [Satsuki couldn't care less.](#)

"There's no point worrying about such trivialities."

Thunder roiled the tumultuous skies as she reached into her pocket. Prior to rendezvousing with Gamagori upon the shores of Tokyo Bay, she'd made the logical decision of appropriating the meteor fragment left in her possession by Aikuro Mikisugi. At the time, it had been sound reasoning. The masked individual's confrontation with Ryuko and Mankanshoku coincided almost perfectly with the meteor showers. If the two events were related and not simply coincidental, perhaps possessing one of the fragments would afford an opening. An opportunity to discover any potential weaknesses, if not shift the tides of battle in their favor.

She did not doubt that, had he known, Tsumugu Kinagase would have passionately disagreed with her decision.

In retrospect, her reasoning behind the artifact had been wrong. But not completely. While the fragment hadn't possessed any such

offensive capabilities, not against the masked youth nor the monsters, it had afforded her salvation from the darkness consuming their world.

Lightning forked across the darkening heavens as she withdrew the artifact from her coat. The hefty size concealed its relatively nonexistent weight. The transparent emerald six-pointed star extruded power, although not through means most readily apparent to those lacking imagination. One could not question the implications of such an object falling into less altruistic hands. But while the fragment allowed travel between worlds, something otherwise impossible for the vast majority of beings, using it required absolute concentration. Something she'd learned firsthand. Any distraction or lapse in concentration, even for a moment, and it would spontaneously activate.

But for someone such as herself... possessing unbreakable willpower and unyielding determination against the endless tides of darkness... it was nothing but another tool. A resource to be utilized with proper discretion and caution.

And yet, despite its vast power, the meteor fragment could not bring her to Ryuko.

Through her glove, the familiar object extruded a soothing warmth independent of temperature. Closing her eyes, Satsuki sighed softly, her breath visible in the bitter air, and cleared her mind. She thought about Ryuko. The only person she cherished above her own life. It was her memories of Ryuko... of everything that happened between them, good or terrible... that had kept her heart strong over the last month. Day after day, night after night, she had focused her efforts upon finding her sister, Gamagori and the others. Something the artifact failed to accomplish.

But perhaps *now* was different.

Perhaps *now* that she knew Ryuko survived, it would finally grant what her heart desired above all else.

Multicolored light akin to a burning supernova poured between her tightening fingers. The sound of crinkling leather echoed across the flooding plaza as she steeled her heart, eyebrows knitting together. And with a sudden jolt and accompanying sensation of reality twisting sideways, Satsuki vanished from Lindblum, leaving behind nothing but flickers of fading white light.

Her Current Outfit

[img:

[
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Last edited: Aug 20, 2018

Chapter 7.3

*It's interesting how Braig's plan in BBS revolved around Xehanort promising he wouldn't become collateral damage. If he knew about the power of the Keyblade, getting anywhere close to Terra would be incredibly stupid. Sure, I know for gameplay reasons you had to actually *hit* him, but there are other ways the boss fight could have gone. For example, countering enough of his arrows that he's temporarily stunning, allowing you to lob magic at him until he recovers. Or a Trigger Command that lets Terra or Aqua instantly teleport to his location, momentarily allowing you to physically attack him.*

But, it turns out, no matter how many butterflies Ryuko throws into the Realm of Light, some things never change.

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/e/e5/Sc00016.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140315010601>]

"Gotcha now!"

Teleporting from wall to wall... from ledge to ledge... hell, even stepping on the air itself... was irritating. But it sure as hell beat the alternative. Because no way, no how, was he going to let the pissed-off keyslinger within arm's reach. He might have no clue about the old coot's grand scheme, and maybe things were going from bad to worse, but it wasn't her Keyblade that unnerved him. No, it was the other sword she used alongside the Keyblade. The one shaped like someone took a pair of scissors, pulled them apart and then made them razor-sharp and capable of deflecting magic.

Bang! Bang!

His latest salvo of arrows shattered against hardened metal.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Blood rushed into his head as he floated upside-down next to the 'captured' old coot. Snapping his arms downwards from his point of view, or rather upwards, Braig squeezed the trigger until his finger cramped. He fired again and again. And yet, to his surprise and frustration, the keyslinger blocked his shots by immediately spinning her Keyblade and so-called, because it really did resemble one, Scissor Blade fast enough until they looked like goddamn helicopters.

Alright, now he was getting pissed off.

His mouth twitched. He grimaced. And his patience started unraveling. Maybe he could have been trying a little harder, perhaps put more *oomph* into everything, but no way should the keyslinger have been outclassing him. At least, not by this much. It was one thing for someone to dodge his shots. A lot of people did it. Hell, the old coot proved himself worthy of his loyalty with a fancy trick. But spinning Keyblade and Scissor Blade until they were nothing but crimson blurs to the naked eye? That was a new one. If he wasn't fighting her, he might have asked for tips on pulling off that stuff.

But the look in her eyes said enough.

He could see, even as she blocked his shots, what the keyslinger was *really* thinking.

"Clever little sneak..."

The mist-filled air condensed against his face as he warped across the purification facility. Reappearing underneath the edge of the platform behind the keyslinger, at an angle she could not see him, Braig snapped his lips shut. With one eye closed and the other gazing through the laser sight, he aimed squarely between her shoulders. He exhaled, the soft sound muffled by heavy machinery and waterfalls. He drew his lips back into a snarl.

And as magic gathered within the rifle, he depressed the trigger.

BANG!

Blood sprayed through the air.

"Son of a -"

Another salvo covered his retreat. It kept the keyslinger pinned down while he tactically retreated onto the pipe next to the smirking old coot. And once he was out of harm's way, Braig gingerly touched the wound on his cheek. A cut stretching from his chin to below his left eye. The hell just happened? Did the brat seriously just deflect his shot? That kind of precision required months, maybe even years, of training! Not something provided by the Keyblade or any other weapon, no matter how powerful.

Forcibly yanked back to reality by the blood dribbling onto the front of his uniform, Braig subconsciously found himself sweating. Boy, that had been close. Another inch or two to the right and he could have seriously died.

This girl was nothing like the geezer's description of Terra!

"You *really* want to do this?"

Several strands of slicked-back hair fell across of his eyes. Everything had been designed to trick Terra into accepting darkness. Including, and not limited to, fighting the naïve wielder until his heart simply couldn't survive without using darkness. A pretty good plan. One he had whole-heartedly endorsed from the moment Xehanort told him about it. But going mano-a-mano with *this* particular keyslinger was giving him second thoughts. There was something not quite right about her. Maybe it was her strange sword, the appropriately named Scissor Blade.

He couldn't really tell.

But if Xehanort was going to spew nonsense about him blowing up Radiant Garden with some super-powerful magical spell, he might as well play the part of a villain and stop holding back.

"Fine! Have it your way!"

In a flicker of darkness-enhanced movement, he teleported onto the platform, bringing him face-to-face with the keyslinger long enough to get her attention. Grinning at her annoyance and frustration, he locked his arms into position, one eye staring through his rifle's laser sight. A single arrow shot forth. And then another. And then yet another. Yet not only were they all blocked, deflected or otherwise stopped, the keyslinger darted forward, dancing through the barrage with her Scissor Blade and Keyblade blocking whatever shots came close to her body.

"Heh..."

At the last possible moment, right before her Scissor Blade sliced through his stomach, space and time warped around him. His boots touched on the platform behind the girl. His arms snapped upwards. With a cocky smirk and darkness boosting his strength, vigor and reflexes far beyond their usual limitations, Braig squeezed the trigger, "Take this!"

BANG!

"Not a chance!"

Ryuko understood what the bastard was planning before he vanished into darkness. A sneak attack after a dramatic declaration was one of the most obvious tricks in the book! Something she learned within days of starting classes at Honnouji Academy.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the bastard's surprise when Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade sliced the overpowered projectile into countless shards of magic. And her mouth twitched when the asshole suddenly retreated across the room like a goddamn coward.

"But if you're gonna keep runnin' away..."

Her eyebrow twitched as she angrily slid one foot backwards. Her fingers relaxed around the Scissor Blade's handle before flipping the hardened Life Fiber weapon into a reversed grip and grasped the crescent-shaped handle. And just as the bastard raised his magical rifle to take another potshot at her expense, Ryuko twisted her upper body, pivoted forward and *threw* the Scissor Blade.

"... then I'm gonna bring the fight to you!"

Braig cursed.

If he wasn't already savvy enough to understand mocking an already pissed-off keyslinger wouldn't end well, he probably would have laughed. Or scoffed. Maybe even throw a couple of taunts. But against an enraged Keyblade wielder willing - and able - to kill him, or possibly worse, without darkness or light or anything other than raw strength and speed, keeping on his toes was priority number one. If he let his guard down, even for a second, the results would probably be painful. And with Xehanort watching and judging like an overprotective grandparent, fleeing into the shadows was out of the question.

"Oh really?"

Unable to stop himself from saying something, Braig leaned sideways, allowing the Scissor Blade to sink up to its strange handle into the wall, only to grimace when the accompanying razor-sharp wind severed a few strands of hair.

"Heh! As if!"

The dozen or so fireballs exploding from the girl's Keyblade wasn't surprising. A lot of people channeled magic through their weapons. He was no different. And when every sphere of searing magical flames missed by more than a mile? Well, he wouldn't have complimented her master's teaching ability.

"You're going to need to try a little -"

Braig literally felt the words faltering in his throat when the keyslinger cocked her arm backwards, planted one foot against the platform and *chucked* her other weapon. Something a lot more dangerous even if, judging by the angle, she missed. Without waiting to see what might happen if he stuck around, he rolled sideways, allowing the legendary blade to slice apart space-time inches from his face. He could feel the power coursing through the Keyblade. It was almost enough to make him reach out and grab it.

But before he could do so, crimson light exploded across his vision.

And in the next blink of an eye, the keyslinger was hovering in front of him, feathery hair fluttering in the mist-filled air and Keyblade clasped tightly in her fingers.

"Humph! Nice try, kid!"

Planting one hand against the ledge for leverage, he vaulted backwards, mist clinging to his uniform. As the surprise attack harmlessly passed underneath his chin, the razor-sharp burst of wind a little too close for comfort, Braig forcibly separated the rifle back into its individual components. Yet he never turned around. Never stopping sprinting down the ledge. Even with twice the potential firepower at his fingertips, glancing over his shoulder when the keyslinger yanked the Scissor Blade out of the wall and resumed the chase was the last thing on his mind.

Alright, not only was the girl fast, she could teleport using her Keyblade. That changed things. Keeping his distance was going to become a lot more difficult. Maybe impossible without pulling another trick or two out of his sleeves. But that was a relatively minor problem.

And then he saw his opening.

It was a minor engineering problem. A harmless issue concerning one of the minor water intakes. It should have been repaired months ago, but since nobody was foolish enough to walk on these ledges, Ansem hadn't felt the need to waste Gil repairing anything.

Which made it *perfect*.

As he emerged from the waterfall cascading over the ledge, Braig twisted midair. Water dripped from his soaked uniform. Magic gathered within the twin arrowguns as his arms snapped into position. And waiting until the keyslinger's shadow appeared within the cascading pillar of water, mouth clenched into a grimace, he immediately squeezed the triggers.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"I'm gonna wipe that smirk right off your face!"

Before his mind caught up with reality, the teenager's fist smashed against his cheek. It snapped his head sideways, skin and muscle rippling under the immense force. Blood and spittle spewed from his gasping lips. His eyes widened. The world spun around him. And as he found himself flying across the purification facility, head reeling and face hurting like a goddamn bitch, Braig replayed the last few seconds.

He'd aimed for her vital organs. No way should the keyslinger have been able to react. Not from such close range.

And yet, she blocked each and every shot.

Space-time turned inside-out before his shoulder slammed against cold metal.

"This... really... sucks..."

As he laid face-down on the platform where everything first went to shit... meeting this keyslinger instead of Terra... releasing the old

coot had another plan... Braig licked his lips before spitting out the blood pooling inside his mouth. Half of his face hurt. And the other half wasn't doing any better. And he didn't need extra-sensory perception or darkness or something else to realize Xehanort was enjoying the goddamn show.

But with an ear-deafening *bang*, he punched the metal underneath his face, snarled and angrily leapt back onto his feet. If the keyslinger wanted to play rough, alright. Fine. Have it her way. He could play rough. No more holding back. No more wasting time on small talk and chitchat. This was the final straw. His patience was gone. So, no matter what it took, he was going to kick her goddamn -

"Huh?"

One glance around the empty aqueducts immediately extinguished his bravery.

"What the -"

A single bead of sweat trickled down his good cheek. Pivoting sharply on his back foot, he spun around until Xehanort was squarely within his sights. The old coot didn't seem to know anything, if the expression in his yellow eyes meant anything. The constant rush of water falling into the purified aquafer hundreds of meters underfoot pressed against his ears. Aiming at the shadowed exit, fingers trembling against the triggers of his twin arrowguns, Braig snapped his attention to the abandoned ledge across the purification facility, the slight quivering of his hands growing more noticeable by the second.

"Where the hell is she?"

Shink!

"Lookin' for someone?"

A crimson blade sharp enough that light itself split along the razor-sharp edge appeared over his right shoulder.

"... shit, ya got me."

How the hell did she get behind him? She couldn't be that fast. Or could she? Even if she could teleport back and forth in the blink of an eye, he should have seen something. But sighing under his breath when the keyslinger flipped the Scissor Blade ninety degrees, he slowly raised both hands into the air. No point being a hero or villain. At this range, the advantage was firmly in the girl's court.

"Using that magic wasn't easy, you know. It took quite a bit of time setting everything up. Almost got caught a couple of times."

His index fingers twitched against the arrowguns. Holding perfectly still was killing his back. But he wasn't stupid. He didn't do anything, not when he knew better. Against an enraged keyslinger with strange powers, another weapon sharper than light itself and a massive axe to grind, the slightest flinch could lead to disastrous consequences, "But looks like my plan's gone to hell. Foiled, if you catch my drift. So, here comes the words you keyslingers like to hear - I surrender. Happy?"

"Who said anything about surrendering?"

Ryuko pushed the Scissor Blade until it was pressing against the bastard's cheek, "Radiant Garden won't be safe until you're dead!"

The declaration sucked the warmth from his heart. Damn it! She really was serious about killing him! And the old coot playing possum wasn't helping. Alright, that settled it! No more playing around. If pretending to surrender wasn't going to get the bitch off his back, that left only one option.

"Damn, you sure know how to -"

In the middle of speaking, right when the keyslinger's attention wavered, he darted forward. He kicked off the ground, ducking underneath the Scissor Blade in the split-second it moved away from his cheek. And as the bitch brought up her Keyblade, intent on finishing the job once and for all, he spun around, swung his left arm into position, locked his elbow, gnashed his teeth and *fired*.

BANG!

Blood splattered through the air as the arrow pierced Ryuko's eye. And in that singular moment, the entire right side of her face vaporized into a fine mist. The momentum snapped her head sideways, painting large swathes of the ground crimson. Her remaining eye quivered as Threadcutter vanished. Her mouth opened and closed at the unbearable pain. She staggered backwards, hunched over with blood gushing between her fingers.

But upon hearing the bastard's not-so-subtle laughter, the pain transformed into unbridled *hatred*.

Stomp!

"YOU SON OF A BITCH!"

Despite half of her mouth laying in bits and pieces across the ground, the words were perfectly legible. Stomping one sneaker against the blood-soaked floor, Ryuko forced her body to move forward. Glaring at the asshole with her remaining eye narrowed to a vicious pinprick, the darkness and negative emotions twisting through her heart evolved into something truly visceral. It brought back memories. Terrible memories. Memories of things best left forgotten.

The psychopath was standing perfectly still, eyes widened and an unmistakable expression of fear spreading across his face. He staggered back several steps, heart and mind seemingly unable to comprehend how she was alive, let alone capable of talking.

With one hand covering the wound that should have killed most people, Ryuko burst into action. Blood mixed with brilliant crimson light fluttered around her body in thickening streams as she forcibly dragged the Scissor Blade through the ground, multicolored sparks jettisoning in its wake. Grasping the hardened Life Fiber weapon with both hands, knuckles bleeding white from the intense pressure, she swung upwards just as the bastard dodged.

Slicing through his right eye.

Original Version

“Gotcha now!”

Teleporting from wall to wall... from ledge to ledge... hell, even stepping on the air itself... was irritating. But it sure as hell beat the alternative. Because no way, no how, was he going to allow the demented keyslinger within arm's reach. Not a chance! He might have no clue about the old coot's plan, and maybe things were going from bad to worse awfully fast, but the Keyblade was another story. Its power was far too dangerous to ignore. Thanks to the geezer keeping him up-to-date about Terra's escapades, including all the grisly, heart-wrenching details, he had a pretty good idea *what* it could do.

No way was he gonna let her steal his heart!

Bang! Bang!

A stream of glowing arrows shattered against hardened metal.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Floating upside-down next to the 'captured' old coot, blood rushed into his head as he fired several more bursts. It should have worked. But every shot missed by the smallest of margins when the keyslinger began darting across the goddamn platform.

Bang! Bang!

His mouth twitched when the Keyblade and so-called Scissor Blade started blocking his shots. It seriously pissed him off! Despite his best efforts, and he was throwing everything into the fight, little-miss-badass was still outclassing him. The weapons were blurs of crimson. They moved too fast... too quickly... for him to track. And her expression. Sure, he wasn't the best judge of character. But he knew that look. He could see, as she continued deflecting and blocking his arrows like they were nothing, what the keyslinger was really thinking.

She was goddamn mocking him!

Keeping himself upside-down, the misty air condensed against his face as he warped across the purification facility. He teleported into position next to the platform, hovering just below the floor. At an angle preventing the keyslinger locking onto his location. With one eye closed and the other peering through the sight, he aimed between her shoulders. He exhaled, the sound heavily masked by the surrounding machinery and waterfalls. He swallowed the bile in the back of his throat, a bead of sweat dripping from his chin.

And as magic gathered within the rifle, he depressed the trigger.

BANG!

Blood sprayed through the air.

"Tch!"

Another salvo covered his retreat. It kept the monstrous brat pinned in place while he teleported onto the pipe next to the smirking old coot. And once he was momentarily out of harm's way, Braig's grimace devolved into full-blown annoyance. Anger caused his mouth to twitch, aggravating the fresh wound on his cheek. He couldn't believe she deflected his shots so goddamn perfectly. That kind of precision required months of training and experience. Not something provided by the Keyblade, even if the damn weapon was freaking powerful. Even *he* wasn't that freaking good!

Drawn from his thoughts by the blood trickling down his cheek, Braig swallowed the lump in his throat. Damn it! Another inch or two to the right and he wouldn't be standing, let alone breathing.

She'd been playing him from the start!

"That clever little sneak..."

Several strands of slicked-back hair fell across of his eyes. Everything had been designed to trick Terra into accepting darkness. Sure, he would have loved getting his hands on the kid's Keyblade. It's what he wanted more than anything. But going mano-a-mano with an enraged keyslinger had been at the bottom of his to-do list. Not to mention the old coot said things weren't that simple. But that had been fine. As long as he got what the geezer promised, a few scrapes and bruises weren't too bad. Hell, he'd put up with broken ribs if it meant having one of those fancy Keyblades.

But if Xehanort was going to spew nonsense about blowing up Radiant Garden, there wasn't any point holding back.

Not if he wanted to leave with his heart intact.

"You want to fight? Fine!"

His index finger twitched against the trigger as he stared through the sight. The corners of his mouth twisted into an enraged snarl at the *confidence* in the keyslinger's eyes. Alongside the darkness emanating from his heart, Braig flickered onto the platform, bringing him face-to-face with the Keyblade wielder long enough to get her attention. A single arrow exploded from his rifle, something she blocked using the Keyblade. His expression hardened when she darted forward faster than expected, Scissor Blade and Keyblade swinging side-by-side.

And at the last possible moment, he sidestepped reality, space-time warping around his body, mind and heart. The darkness boosted his strength. It gave him enough mental fortitude to snap his arms

into position upon appearing behind the enraged keyslinger, “Take this!”

“As if I’ll fall for that!”

Ryuko understood the bastard’s plan long before he vanished alongside that wispy darkness. A sneak attack after a dramatic declaration was one of the first lessons she learned back at Honnouji Academy!

An irritated snarl escaped her throat as she pivoted on the spot, bring her face-to-face with the bastard. Her heart tracked his annoying darkness. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed several strands of familiar crimson brushing against her forehead. They brought back memories. Painful memories. Things she’d forgotten outside of her nightmares. For a moment, she stiffened, her eyes widening as Senketsu’s voice echoed in the depths of her heart. The world wavered. Her mouth opened and closed.

And just as quickly, she crossed Threadcutter over the Scissor Blade before slicing them apart, shattering the overpowered projectile into millions of pieces.

“But if you’re gonna keep runnin’ away...”

Ryuko glared at the arrogant bastard perched on the ledge. The corners of her mouth twitched as she slid her right foot backwards, twisting her entire body sideways. Her fingers relaxed around the Scissor Blade before grasping the crescent-shaped handle with enough pressure that her knuckles bled white. And as the asshole raised his rifle to take another potshot, anger gave her the strength to *throw* the hardened Life Fiber at him.

“... then I’m bringing the fight to you!”

Braig cursed under his breath.

If he wasn't savvy enough to know pissing her off wouldn't end well, he would have laughed. Maybe even thrown a few taunts in her general direction. But against an enraged keyslinger willing - and able - to kill him, or worse, staying on his toes was hard enough without the extra baggage. In any case, he leaned sideways, carefully watching the Scissor Blade disappear into the wall up to its handle, and grimaced as the accompanying razor-sharp wind sliced through a few strands of hair.

"As if!"

The dozen or so fireballs erupting from the teenager's Keyblade weren't surprising. Lots of people channeled magic through their weapons. He was no different. And when every searing ball of magical flames missed by a mile? Well, he wouldn't have complimented her master's teaching ability.

"You're going to need to try a little -"

His retort faltered when the keyslinger threw her *other* weapon. Something far more dangerous even if she, judging by the angle, missed. Without waiting to see what happened, Braig leaned backwards, allowing the legendary blade to slice through space-time inches from his nose. He could feel the power coursing through the Keyblade. It was enough to almost make him reach out and grab it. But before he could do so, his heart skipped a beat when he caught a flicker of crimson light.

And in the next second, the teenager was hovering next to him, knees drawn to her chest, feathery hair fluttering in the misty air and Keyblade clasped tightly in her fingers.

"Hmph! I wasn't born yesterday!"

He planted one hand against the ledge and vaulted backwards, mist clinging to his uniform. As the surprise attack passed underneath his chin, the accompanying breeze of magic a little too close for comfort, Braig forcibly separated his rifle into its individual

components. But he never stopping sprinting. Even with twice the firepower at his disposal, he barely glanced over his shoulder when the keyslinger yanked her Scissor Blade out of the wall and resumed the chase.

Alright, so the girl could teleport. And was really fast on her feet. That changed things. Keeping his distance was going to become a lot more difficult. Maybe even impossible. She only needed a single opening to steal his heart. Something that, for a brief moment, filled his existence with incomprehensible dread.

But the battle was *far* from over.

It was a minor problem. A harmless issue concerning one of the water intakes. But since nobody patrolled the purification facility's ledges, Ansem hadn't felt the need to repair anything.

Which made it *perfect*.

As he emerged from the waterfall cascading over the ledge, Braig twisted midair, bringing him face-to-face with the approaching teenager. Water dripped from his uniform as his arms snapped upwards. Magic gathered around his arrowguns as they locked into position. And with a resolute snarl, he didn't waste a moment before squeezing their triggers.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"I'm gonna wipe that smirk right off your face!"

A clenched fist smashed against his cheek. It snapped his head sideways, blood sputtering from his gasping lips. All in the span of a single second. Before his mind realized the teenager closed the distance between them. And Braig found himself flying across the purification facility. The world spun around him. Darkness flickered against his consciousness as he began desperately replaying the last few seconds. His shots had ripped holes in her clothes. He'd made sure to aim at vital organs. With the waterfall blocking her

line of sight, the pissed-off keyslinger shouldn't have seen anything coming.

But not a single shot pierced her skin.

Space-time wavered before his back slammed against cold metal.

"Alright... enough is enough!"

Laying on the platform where everything first went to shit... meeting the girl instead of Terra... realizing the old coot had another plan... Braig ignored the blood dripping from the corner of his mouth. The world spun around him, colors and sounds warping into some strange mixture. But with an ear-deafening *bang*, he punched his clenched fist against the ground before leaping back onto his feet. Blood dripped from his chin. Half of his face hurt. The other half was barely moving. And he didn't need to look over his shoulder to realize the geezer was enjoying the show.

But like hell was he gonna die! Not before getting what the old bastard promised and then some!

Yet one glance around the eerily quiet aqueducts stifled his bravery.

"Where the hell did she go?"

A single bead of sweat dripped down his cheek. Gasping slightly, he spun around until Xehanort stood within his sights. Somewhere in the background, water dripped into the tranquil lake below the purification facility. He aimed at the exit, taking several potshots when one of the shadows flickered, before snapping back to the empty ledge, the slight trembling in his hands growing increasingly noticeable with every passing second.

"... lookin' for someone?"

A crimson blade, the edge sharp enough that light itself split along the surface, flashed in the corner of his eye.

He clenched his teeth when the keyslinger flipped the Scissor Blade ninety degrees. His fingers subtly twitched against the arrowguns as light reflected off the blade. His muscles burned from holding perfectly still, knowing one slight flinch and the psychotic teenager - no, monster - wouldn't hesitate to slice off his head. He waited until she began speaking. And once her attention wavered, he *moved*.

Pushing off the ground, he ducked around the Scissor Blade, swung his left arm backwards, elbow locking into place, and *fired*.

BANG!

Blood sprayed violently through the air as the well-aimed shot blew through Ryuko's right eye. The arrow destroyed the entire right side of her face. Everything from her cheek to her forehead exploded. Her head snapped backwards, painting the surrounding ground crimson with her blood. Her remaining eye quivered within its socket. Her mouth opened and closed as Threadcutter vanished into the depths of her heart. Clasp her hand around the gaping wound that had, until a few seconds ago, been most of her face, Ryuko staggered back several steps.

But pain quickly devolved into unyielding *hatred*.

"YOU SON OF A BITCH!"

The bastard must not have known she could regenerate. That she was tougher than normal people. Because he didn't move. Not even an inch.

Which was *perfect*.

As she glared at the asshole with her remaining eye, anger flushed deeper into her heart. The darkness and negative emotions twisted her hatred into something truly visceral. It brought back memories. Terrible memories. Memories of things best left forgotten. With one hand still covering her partially destroyed face, a wound that should

have *killed* most people, Ryuko stepped within arm's reach of the petrified bastard. She dragged the Scissor Blade through the ground, multicolored sparks jettisoning in its wake. And then, at the right moment, despite the guy dodging at the last possible second, she swung upwards.

Slicing through *his* right eye.

Last edited: Jan 29, 2019

Chapter 7.4

As stated above, I rewrote the last few paragraphs of the first section. Sometimes what works to end a section doesn't necessary work when picking up again. In any case, enjoy!

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/4/41/Sc00009.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140315010446>]

Blood splattered through the air as the arrow pierced Ryuko's eye. And in that singular moment, the entire right side of her face vaporized into a fine mist. The momentum snapped her head sideways, painting large swathes of the ground crimson. Her remaining eye quivered as Threadcutter vanished. Her mouth opened and closed at the unbearable pain. She staggered backwards, hunched over with blood gushing between her fingers.

But upon hearing the bastard's not-so-subtle laughter, the pain transformed into unbridled *hatred*.

Stomp!

"YOU SON OF A BITCH!"

Despite half of her mouth laying in bits and pieces across the ground, the words were perfectly legible. Stomping one sneaker against the blood-soaked floor, Ryuko forced her body to move forward. Glaring at the asshole with her remaining eye narrowed to a vicious pinprick, the darkness and negative emotions twisting through her heart evolved into something truly visceral. It brought back memories. Terrible memories. Memories of things best left forgotten.

The psychopath was standing perfectly still, eyes widened and an unmistakable expression of fear spreading across his face. He

staggered back several steps, heart and mind seemingly unable to comprehend how she was alive, let alone capable of talking.

With one hand covering the wound that should have killed most people, Ryuko burst into action. Blood mixed with brilliant crimson light fluttered around her body in thickening streams as she forcibly dragged the Scissor Blade through the ground, multicolored sparks jettisoning in its wake. Grasping the hardened Life Fiber weapon with both hands, knuckles bleeding white from the intense pressure, she swung upwards just as the bastard dodged.

Slicing through his right eye.

"GAAAHHH!!!!"

Staggering backwards, hands clawing at his face, twin arrowguns clattering to the ground, Braig screamed at the top of his lungs. Goddamn it! God fucking damn it! The geezer promised he wouldn't be collateral damage. But now he was freaking half-blind. But through the blood spilling between his clenched fingers, adrenaline flooding his veins and numbing the pain running rampant throughout his body, Braig glared at the inhuman keyslinger.

"You bitch!"

He couldn't remember how it happened. There was a blank spot in his memories. But after somehow managing to pick up one of the arrowguns, he stumbled back a couple of steps, one hand still grasping his bleeding face and the other raising the weapon to almost eyelevel. Just what sort of monster was this girl? How the hell could anyone survive half of their goddamn head getting blown to pieces? Even the geezer would be dead! Yet the keyslinger didn't seem bothered in the slightest! Not only was she still standing on her own feet, but she appeared fine and dandy for someone whose brain was splattered across the ground.

"Just what... the hell... are you?"

His breath hitched in the back of his throat. Resolve quickly gave way to fear. This wasn't a fight he could win. Not as things currently stood. If he didn't escape *now*, there was no doubt he'd lose something a little more important than an eye.

But the crimson light spilling from the gushing wound, an eldritch orange-yellow mixed alongside disturbingly monstrous darkness, turned his legs into mush.

"What the -"

Writhing black flames slammed into the platform, shattering whatever hold the light had over his heart. Reality slammed against his mind. The world returned with a dull *whump*. Light and sounds returned. And as the darkness-infused magic dissipated, leaving behind nothing more than partially-melted metal, Braig's attention shifted upwards.

"Oh, hell no!"

If this was the geezer's grand scheme, he'll play along. At least for now. And only until he got what he wanted. Shooting one last glare at the monstrous keyslinger, and then at Xehanort when the master decided to 'save' the girl, he stepped backwards, vanishing into darkness. And a moment later, reappeared at the top of the stairs, blood dripping between his fingers.

"This ain't over!"

His shoulder brushed against the wall as he staggered into the darkness, "You're gonna pay! I'll make *sure* of that!"

"Get back here!"

Despite the fist-sized portion of her head laying splattered across the ground, Ryuko wasn't encumbered in the slightest as she resumed chasing the goon, "We ain't finished!"

"You're in no condition to fight, Ryuko."

"Like hell I'm not!"

Why the hell was the old man sticking his nose in her business and acting like he gave a damn? Just because that cowardly, egotistical and incredibly frustrating son of a bitch scratched her face with a lucky shot didn't mean she was down for the count! It might look bad. Most people couldn't shake off getting shot point-blank in the face, let alone talk about their stupid problems. Which is why she ignored him. But when the master teleported in front of her, ominous-looking Keyblade barring her path and concern in his eyes, Ryuko quickly reiterated her point.

"Out of my way!"

Xehanort was speechless, but not because of Ryuko's indomitable tenacity in the face of otherwise lethal wounds. No, it was the crimson light, shimmering orange-yellow lurking below the surface, radiating from the egregious injury which necessitated such uncharacteristic silence.

It was amazing beyond comprehension. He could not think of any words to describe the miraculous feat he was lucky enough to witness with his own eyes. As he stared, feigning what should have been concern, the calamitous wound began self-mending in ways he'd never seen. It resembled, only in the barest definition, the extensive darkness permeating Ardyn Lucis Caelum's heart. The same darkness which prevented the ancient being from permanently departing the Realm of Light. He observed the copious blood coating Ryuko's skin and clothing fade into nothingness, as if absorbed back into her body. He leaned forward, eyes widening ever-so-slightly, masking curiosity with worry, as flesh and bone didn't so much regenerate as stitch themselves back together, replacing the gaping nothingness with unblemished substance.

And the *darkness*.

He remembered Ardyn's vague prophecy about Ryuko. At the time, he'd thought the warning nothing more than the man's attempt at caustic humor. But in accordance with the ancient being's claims, immensely powerful darkness lurked within the girl's heart. A darkness existing alongside a strange light, one immeasurably bright yet extruding a disturbing shadow.

It was truly fascinating.

"Are you even listening?"

Unaware of Xehanort's entirely platonic fascination with her body, Ryuko angrily summoned Threadcutter into her waiting fingers, preparing to force her way through the master, "We gotta stop that shithead!"

"Calm yourself, Ryuko."

Curiosity oozed into his voice, although not capable of betraying his innermost thoughts to the girl. It would be trouble if Ryuko killed, or worse, captured, Braig. The man was envious of the Keyblade. Yet if given the choice between death or freedom, he harbored little doubt what the guard would choose. However, dwelling on things yet to happen was foolish. While contemplating potential complications with Yen Sid, Eraqus or Beatrix remained at the forefront of his heart, everything was still proceeding as planned.

Ryuko's interference might have proved somewhat inconveniencing in the short term, but Terra still craved power. That hadn't changed. Even if it were something as short-sighted and ephemeral as friendship, the boy was easily led astray. It was only a matter of time until his heart succumbed to the irresistible pull of darkness.

["There's no reason to dwell upon impossibilities."](#)

Unperturbed by the anger radiating from the teenager's heart, he descended the stairs one by one, a faint smile pulling upon the

corners of his mouth, "For you see, that cowardly ruffian no longer poses any substantial threat to this world."

The corner of Ryuko's mouth violently twitched. Had the old man seriously lost his marbles? No way was that asshole finished! If anything, he'd come gunning for revenge when their backs were turned. And yet, despite her 'bullshit alarm' going haywire, she dismissed Threadcutter, but not without snorting in frustration, "How the hell do you know that?"

"Concentration is the cornerstone of magic."

An emerald light shimmered around No Name, flickers of green leaf-like motes of energy, as the bruise underneath Xehanort's eye disappeared into nothingness, "For most spells, one merely requires *thinking* about what they wish to cast. Do I wish to summon fire, ice or wind? Once decided, the heart does the rest. And from that, imagination becomes reality."

Flickers of fire possessing purple-black coloration sprung into existence around his empty fingers. The heat could be felt. The power touched. And just as quickly, the darkness-tainted magic dissipated, "But for more powerful magic, concentration is critical. One must not only visualize what they wish to accomplish, but also strain themselves to make it so. Any loss of focus, even for a moment, could render one's efforts meaningless."

"... I guess that makes sense."

As much as it annoyed her, Ryuko begrudgingly admitted Xehanort made a good point. Magic was stupid-painful difficult. She still remembered Beatrix lecturing on and on about how she couldn't rely on the Keyblade or Scissor Blade for everything. That she needed composure and focus if she wished to use Seiken without accidentally exploding an arm or something equally terrible. And maybe Beatrix was right. The woman was almost always right.

But something didn't add up. And it had nothing to do with the weird eye-like jewel glued to his Keyblade, "I noticed you broke those chains no problem! Mind explaining *that!*?"

"Hmph, did you actually believe that uncouth ruffian captured me?"

Soft, almost insulted, laughter was the master's response, "I could have escaped such feeble imprisonment any time I wished."

Unlike the arthritic old man unraveling the edges of her patience, Ryuko *wasn't* amused, "Then why the hell didn't you?"

"... an unfortunate miscalculation. But one I wouldn't have changed."

Xehanort allowed the words to hang heavily in the air, "If the man had been unstable or short-tempered, the slightest provocation could have set him off, dooming thoughts of innocent lives. An unimaginable cost. That is why when he ambushed me in town, I surrendered without so much as a fight."

"You told him about Terra, didn't you!?"

He sighed, remorse etched across his aged features. This wasn't how Braig's defeat was meant to transpire, but he was, if anything, adaptable, "Yes. I did. And not a second passes that I don't regret it. But when that dishonorable thug threatened to destroy this world, I needed a way to stall for time. And so, I told him about the Keyblade's power. Something I'm certain Eraqus would find repugnant. Yet, it worked. Once I confessed that Terra would shortly arrive... and by defeating him, the power of the Keyblade would be his... that psychopath briefly stepped away from the edge of madness."

"So, Terra was nothing more than bait?"

Ryuko's biting retort was anticipated. And so, after suppressing a smirk, something the girl would undoubtedly notice even in her frustrated state of mind, Xehanort allowed faux guilt and regret carry

him across the platform until he was standing next to the railing, "I knew Terra would prove himself far beyond the ruffian's expectations. A Keyblade wielder - no, a master - of Terra's caliber... capable of destroying a Hunter of the Dark with your assistance... isn't so easily bested. As I'm sure you can attest. If everything had gone as planned, Terra's power would have overwhelmed that contemptible thug."

His posture slouched alongside another weary sigh, "After Eraqus failed to see reason, I realized my old friend was too stubborn. Since we were children, he had always refused to think of light and darkness as equal. To him, darkness is an abomination. And Terra's accidental usage in Burmecia precludes his student from every becoming master. However, by defeating that abhorrent ruffian and saving Radiant Garden with nothing but his own strength, Terra would have demonstrated the mark of a true master. Something Eraqus couldn't ignore."

"That's bullshit logic!"

A hiss of air passed between her teeth. But with immense restraint, Ryuko buried that anger inside her heart. She spat to the side, a scowl twisting her features. Being angry at Xehanort wouldn't change anything. Not if she wanted some answers, "You know what, I don't care. Because what I *really* want to know is why that asshole can't just unleash his magic somewhere else!"

"The answer should be obvious, Ryuko."

No Name dematerialized as he glanced over his shoulder, "By channeling your anger, you blinded him. A grievous wound to most people. In such an agonizing condition, gathering the concentration necessary for anything more than the simplest magics will be impossible."

"Fuck that!"

And just like that, her anger and hatred returned. Frustration simmered upon the surface of her heart as she hoped, truly, Xehanort wasn't suggesting she let the asshole escape. Because if he *was*, nothing would stop her from pounding both of their faces into the ground, "You're asking *me* to turn the other cheek? After that bastard *gloated* about wanting to destroy this world!?"

"Of course not!"

He snapped angrily, perhaps more passionately than necessary. His fingers clenched as forced trembles wracked his shoulders. Despite the darkness, anger and frustration puppeteering her heart, Ryuko was surprisingly observant. A dangerous attribute combined with her untrusting disposition, something lacked by Eraqus's pupils One slip of the tongue... one misplaced detail... and she'd unravel the entire tapestry, "Don't you *dare* presume I would allow another world fall into darkness! Every day Vanitas is free to spread darkness and chaos across the worlds is another reminder of my failure as his master."

The faux weight of responsibility and guilty pressed upon his shoulders, "That is why I'm asking you leave his capture to me."

"Hell no!"

She didn't even bother letting Xehanort finish before interrupting, "I can handle him just fine on my own!"

"It's not a question of strength, Ryuko."

Her vehement defiance was anticipated. But with a furrowed brow, keeping his shoulders slouched and admitting enough details to warrant suspicion, Ryuko was never the wiser, "You possess the strength of a Keyblade Master. Your heart, although stained by unfathomable sorrow, remains untainted by darkness. But determining *how* that uncouth ruffian learned such frightening magic is far more important than ending his life. I believe Beatrix taught you the difference between power and knowledge, did she not?"

"Yeah, so what?"

A weary sigh, punctuated by what resembled guilt-filled grumbling, accompanied another slouch of his shoulders upon mentioning her master's name, "Those aligned closer to the light would never teach that goon anything. Merlin. Lulu. Yen Sid. None of them would dare bestow their knowledge upon such undeserving scum. Which leaves relatively few alternatives..."

Ryuko felt something snap into place, "You sayin' that guy's working for Ardyn?"

The elderly master nodded, allowing Ryuko to draw whatever conclusions she wished from their dialogue, "Ardyn Lucis Caelum is the most likely culprit. Which is why capturing this man is critically important. The information he knows might be necessary to stop Ardyn's plans, whatever they might be."

A moment passed in absolute silence as Ryuko glared at the older Keyblade wielder.

"Fine!"

It sucked letting anyone else kick the shit out of the asshole. But she remembered Ardyn's threat. The insane psychopath knew about Satsuki. He knew about everyone. And if he found Satsuki or Mako or anyone else, Ryuko didn't know what she'd do. Merely thinking about Mako made her heart ache. Biting the inside of her cheek hard enough to feel some semblance of pain, she forcibly spat out the rest of her answer, "Just try not screwing *this* up!"

Xehanort didn't respond to the threatening declaration as he took several measured paces towards the stairs. The emotions radiating from Ryuko's heart were easily readable. And upon passing the enraged girl, the difference between their heights noticeable despite his slouched posture, he waited a moment, mouth pursed into a tight grimace, before asking, "Have you confronted Vanitas?"

"Not yet!"

Ryuko scoffed at the question, "But Mickey and Ven - I mean, Ventus - fought him a little while ago."

"I see..."

His amber eyes narrowed, hints of annoyance dancing within their depths. While luring Ventus away from Eraqus was necessary, it was still too early for his reunion with Vanitas. The boy needed to become stronger. If the X-Blade were to be forged, allowing him access to the infinite power and secrets dwelling within Kingdom Hearts, Ventus's light needed to match Vanitas's darkness. Something that wouldn't occur underneath Eraqus's heavy-handed guidance. Ventus was close. But there was still more work to be done before he was ready.

"... that is most troubling."

The answer hung on the tip of his tongue, "If Ventus suffered because of my mistakes... no, there's no point focusing on the past. What's done is done. Once I apprehend the ruffian, I'll speak with Yen Sid and Eraqus about this unexpected development."

"Wait!"

Dragging her tongue against the corners of her lips, Ryuko watched Xehanort stop halfway up the stairs. With a metallic *clank*, she swung the Scissor Blade onto her shoulders, the deep crimson weapon dispersing the surrounding light into twinkling motes. Maybe she was going soft, but it couldn't have been easy for Xehanort to consider killing Vanitas, no matter how psychopath the masked bastard was. But no matter how much she might understand Xehanort backing down, that didn't mean shit. Not when the old geezer's cowardice led to her world getting sucked into darkness.

"If I find out this guy's escaped, I'm going to make *you* suffer!"

Head cocked sideways, blood still smeared in her hair, she pointed the Scissor Blade at the master, "Got it!?"

Xehanort stopped on the middle landing between the stairs. And then he started laughing in a weird, almost grandfatherly way.

"It would appear you take after Beatrix more than you might realize."

Ryuko didn't know what to say as Xehanort disappeared into the darkness leading back to town. Hell, what could she say? Was that a compliment or insult or both? Damn it! She didn't have anything in common with Beatrix! Not a damn thing! Well, maybe they shared the same sense of humor when it came to oglops. And she did find Beatrix's fighting style amazingly kickass! But at the very least, the old coot could have same something vaguely positive instead of enigmatic bullshit!

"Ugh!"

This was *perfect*. Just goddamn perfect. Why the hell couldn't she catch a freaking break? First Ardyn appeared out of nowhere. And now some random asshole with a massive chip on his shoulders threatens to blow up Radiant Garden. At the rate her life was going, she half-expected Vanitas to ambush her on the way back to town. Which, while great since it meant finally kicking his ass, only proved someone out there was screwing with her life.

"Terra better not have fucked things up with Aqua!"

Original Version

Blood sprayed through the air as the shot pierced Ryuko's eye. And in that singular moment, the right side of face vaporized into a fine mist. The pain was unbearable. The momentum snapped her head sideways, painting large swathes of the ground crimson. Her remaining eye quivered as Threadcutter disappeared into the depths of her heart. Her mouth opened and closed as she clasped her hand over the gaping wound. And as she staggered backwards,

hunched over with blood gushing between her fingers, something *snapped* in her heart.

And pain quickly transformed into unbridled *hatred*.

“YOU SON OF A BITCH!”

Anger flushed deeper into her heart as she glared at the asshole with her remaining eye. The darkness and negative emotions twisted her hatred into something truly visceral. It brought back memories. Terrible memories. Memories of things best left forgotten. And much to her benefit, the bastard must not have known she could survive getting shot in the head. Because he wasn't moving. Not even an inch. In fact, he was standing perfectly still, eyes widened and an unmissable expression spreading across his face.

With one hand covering the wound that should have killed *most* people, Ryuko launched herself towards the petrified psychopath. Streams of thick blood mixed with disturbing crimson light as she dragged the Scissor Blade through the ground, multicolored sparks jettisoning in its wake. And at the best possible moment, despite the guy dodging when he realized what she was planning, she pivoted on her back foot and swung upwards.

Slicing through *his* right eye.

“GAAAAAA!!!”

Braig screamed when the Scissor Blade slashed across the right side of his face.

Staggering backwards, the twin arrowguns clattered to the ground as he grabbed his face. Goddamn it! The old coot promised he wasn't going to be collateral damage! And now he was freaking blind! Adrenaline flooded his veins, numbing the agony growing by the second, as he tried calming down. But through the blood

spilling between his gloved fingers, his single remaining eye glaring at the source of his troubles.

“I’M GOING TO KILL YOU!”

He didn’t have any recollection. The few seconds were a blank spot in his memories. But after somehow managing to pick up one of the arrowguns without the insane keyslinger using his body as a pincushion, he stumbled forward, one hand still pressed against the bloody gash running down the right side of his face. This was it! He was going to make the psychopath pay! But as he raised his shaking arm, index fingers about to squeeze the trigger, Braig found himself unable to move an inch.

Something wasn’t right.

How the hell could anyone survive getting half of their goddamn head blown to pieces? It was impossible! Even the old coot would be lying dead on the ground! Yet the teenager didn’t seem bothered in the slightest. Angry? Sure. Pissed to high heavens? Of course. But in agonizing pain? Not only was she standing on her own feet, but she appeared fine and dandy for someone whose brain was splattered across the ground. His breath hitched in the back of his throat, resolve quickly giving way to fear. Alright! That settled it! His heart was telling him to flee before he lost something a little more important than an eye.

And Keyblade or not, Braig wanted nothing more than to get as far away from the bitch as possible.

But the crimson light spilling from her wound, an eldritch orange-yellow mixed alongside the disturbing glow, kept him from moving.

“What the...”

Darkness-tainted flames slammed into the platform, shattering whatever disturbing hold the strange light had over his heart. Reality slammed against his mind. The world returned with a dull

whump. And as the purple-black fireball disintegrated into tendrils of smaller orbs, each powerful enough to *burn* metal while purposely avoiding the monstrous keyslinger, Braig glanced upwards.

“Shit!”

One look at the old coot’s Keyblade spoke volumes. If this was the geezer’s game, he’ll play along. But only until he got what he was promised! Glaring at the monster standing in front of him, and then Xehanort when the bastard decided to play ‘hero,’ he stepped backwards and vanished. And a moment later, reappeared at the top of the stairs, blood dripping between his fingers, “This isn’t over!”

His shoulder brushed against the wall as he staggered into the darkness, “You’re gonna pay! I’ll make *sure* of that!”

“Get back here!”

Despite the fist-sized chunk missing from the right side of her head, something that should have killed most people but was only mildly inconveniencing at best, Ryuko’s speech wasn’t slurred in the slightest as she resumed the chase, Scissor Blade propped against her shoulder, “We ain’t finished!”

“You’re in no condition to fight, Ryuko!”

“Like hell I’m not!”

Why the hell was the old man acting like he gave a damn? Just because that cowardly, egotistical son of a bitch scratched her face didn’t mean she was out for the count! Sure, it might look bad. Most people couldn’t shake off getting shot in the freaking head. Nevertheless, she ignored Xehanort as best she could. But when the guy teleported in front of her, his fancy Keyblade barring her path, she forcibly reiterated the point, “C’mon! He’s getting away!”

Xehanort was speechless, but not because of the girl's indomitable tenacity. No, it was the crimson light, shimmering orange-yellow lurking within, radiating forth from her uncovered wound that elicited such uncharacteristic silence.

Before his eyes, the calamitous injury began self-mending in ways he'd never witnessed. It resembled, only in the barest definition of the word, the extensive darkness permeating Ardyn Lucis Caelum's heart. The same darkness which prevented the ancient being from permanently departing the Realm of Light. As the comparison ran through his mind, he observed the copious blood fade into Ryuko's skin. He leaned forward ever-so-slightly, masking curiosity with concern, when flesh and bone didn't so much stitch together, as expected if one used restoration magic, but replaced the gaping nothingness with unblemished substance.

And the *darkness*.

He remembered Ardyn's vague prophecy about the girl. At the time, he'd thought the warning the man's attempt at caustic humor. And while he'd been curious, his other plans involving young Terra, Vanitas and forging the X-Blade despite his former apprentice's weakness had taken priority. But in accordance with Ardyn's claims, powerful darkness lurked deep inside the girl's heart. A darkness existing alongside a strange light, one immeasurably bright yet extruding a disturbing shadow.

It was truly fascinating.

"Are you even listening?"

Unaware of Xehanort's fascination with her body, Ryuko angrily summoned Threadcutter into her waiting fingers. Sure, the pain of having half her face blown away hurt like a freaking bitch! But a few seconds of pain was nothing compared to her plans for the not-so-smug asshole fleeing with his tail between his legs, "We still gotta stop that shithead!"

“Calm yourself, Ryuko.”

Curiosity oozed into his tone, although not capable of betraying his inner thoughts. It would be trouble if Ryuko killed or worse, captured, Braig. The man was still useful. His jealousy easily manipulated. But he wasn't loyal. Not yet. Given the choice between life and death, or perhaps the loss of his heart, he would more likely than not confess everything. Information that best remained secret. However, dwelling on things yet to come was foolish. While contemplating potential confrontations with Yen Sid, Eraqus or Beatrix remained at the forefront of his mind, nothing had deviated too badly.

Although Ryuko's unexpected interference had proved inconveniencing, nothing had changed. Terra craved power, even for something as ephemeral and pointless as friendship. It was only a matter of time until his heart succumbed to darkness.

[“There's no reason to dwell upon impossibilities.”](#)

Unperturbed by the anger radiating from the teenager's heart, he descended the stairs one by one, a faint smile pulling upon the corners of his mouth, “For you see, that cowardly ruffian no longer poses any substantial threat to this world.”

Ryuko's mouth twitched. Was the old man seriously trying to buy her silence with such an obvious excuse? No freaking way was the bastard finished! If anything, he'd come gunning for revenge! And yet, despite her 'bullshit' alarm going haywire, she dismissed Threadcutter, but not before snorting, “How the hell do you know that?”

“Concentration and focus are cornerstones of magic.”

An emerald light shimmered around No Name, flickers of green leaf-like motes of energy, as the bruise underneath Xehanort's eye disappeared into nothingness, “For most spells, one merely requires *thinking* about what they wish to cast. Do I wish to

summon fire, ice or wind? The heart does the rest. And, thus, imagination springs forth into reality.”

Xehanort furrowed his brow while raising one hand - his free hand - in front of his chest, fingers curled upwards. A moment later, flames possessing disturbing purple-black coloration sprung into existence. And just as quickly, the darkness-tainted magical fire dissipated, “But for more powerful magic, concentration is required. One must visualize what they wish to accomplish. The slightest loss of focus renders one’s efforts meaningless.”

“I *guess* that makes sense...”

As much as she hated thinking about it, Ryuko begrudgingly admitted Xehanort had a point. Magic was stupid-painful difficult. And his explanation was almost an exact word-for-word match to Beatrix’s speeches about magic. She still remembered Beatrix lecturing on and on about how she couldn’t keep swinging the Keyblade like an idiot. That she needed composure and style if she wished to use Seiken without accidentally exploding an arm. And maybe Beatrix had been right.

But something didn’t add up. And it had nothing to do with the weird eye-like jewel in Xehanort’s Keyblade, “... anyway, I noticed you broke those chains no problem! You mind trying to explain *that!*?”

“Hmph, did you actually believe that uncouth ruffian captured me?”

Soft, almost grandfatherly, laughter was the Keyblade Master’s amused response as he turned around, “I could have escaped such feeble imprisonment any time I wished.”

Unlike the arthritic old man unraveling the edges of her patience, Ryuko *wasn’t* chuckling at the so-called joke, “Then why the hell didn’t you? I could have lost my goddamn eye!”

“... an unfortunate miscalculation.”

Xehanort afforded himself the posture of someone whose heart was weighed by imperceptible guilt. He breathed deeply, exhaling just as loudly. And through confessing to what Ryuko believed about his actions, solemnly shook his head, "I could have easily defeated that goon. But when he ambushed me in town, I quickly surrendered without a fight. If he was unstable or short-tempered, the slightest provocation could have set him off, dooming thousands of innocents. An unimaginable cost I refused to accept!"

"You're the one who told that asshole about Terra, aren't you!?"

He sighed, remorse etched itself across his aged features. This wasn't how Braig's defeat was meant to transpire, but he was, if anything, adaptable, "When that thug threatened thousands of lives, I decided to stall for time. And to do so, I told him about the Keyblade. Foolishness at its best. Something Eraqus would undoubtedly find repugnant. But when I confessed that Terra, an aspiring Keyblade Master, would arrive... and that by defeating him, the legendary power of the Keyblade would be his... that man stepped away from the edge of madness."

"So, Terra was nothing more than bait?"

Ryuko's biting retort, anger permeating every syllable, was anticipated. He suppressed the building desire to smirk, something the girl would undoubtedly notice, even in her frustrated state of mind. Instead, Xehanort allowed faux guilt and regret carry him across the platform until he was standing next to the railing, "I knew Terra would prove himself far beyond the ruffian's expectations. A Keyblade wielder of Terra's caliber... someone who defeated a Hunter of the Dark... isn't so easily overwhelmed, as I'm sure you can attest. If everything had gone as planned, that contemptible thug would have found himself outmatched."

His breath hitched alongside another weary sigh, "It would have been a replacement Mark of Mastery. After Eraqus failed to see reason, I realized he would never change his mind. Not without proof. By defeating that abhorrent ruffian using nothing more than

his own strength and saving Radiant Garden from his diabolic plans, Terra would have demonstrated qualities deserving of Keyblade Master.”

“That doesn’t even make any sense!”

A hiss of air passed between her clenched teeth. But with *immense* restraint, Ryuko calmed herself. Snapping at the old man for making stupid decisions wouldn’t change anything. Not if she wanted some answers, “You know what, I don’t care! What I really want to know is why that psychopath won’t just unleash his magic somewhere else!”

“The answer should be obvious, Ryuko.”

No Name dematerialized within flickers of burning darkness as he glanced over his shoulder, “By channeling your anger, you blinded him. A grievous wound to most people, debilitating to others. In such an agonizing condition, gathering the concentration necessary for anything more than the simplest magics will be impossible.”

“You better not be thinkin’ about letting him go!”

And just like that, her anger returned. Frustration simmered inside her heart as she hoped Xehanort wasn’t about to say something goddamn stupid. Because if he did, nothing was gonna stop her from pounding his face into the ground, “You... *you*... are asking ME to let that bastard go? After he *threatened* to destroy this world?”

“Of course not!”

He snapped angrily, perhaps more passionately than necessary, at the insinuation. His fingers clenched into fists as forced trembles wracked his shoulders. Despite the darkness, anger and frustration puppeteering her heart, Ryuko was surprisingly observant. One slip... one errant detail out of place... and she’d unravel the entire tapestry. A dangerous attribute combined with her untrusting

disposition, something lacked by Eraqus's naïve pupils, "Don't you *dare* presume I would allow another world fall into darkness! Every day Vanitas is free to spread darkness and chaos across the worlds is another reminder of my failure as his master!"

The weight of responsibility pressed upon his shoulders slumped as he turned around, unable to bear Ryuko's withering glare, "That is why I ask you leave his capture to me."

"Hell no!"

She didn't even bother letting him finish. Maybe the guy was going somewhere. But Ryuko found it really difficult to give a crap about anything he said, "I can handle him just fine!"

"It's not a question of strength, Ryuko."

Her vehement defiance was anticipated. At this stage, improvising was tedious, particularly against someone with such keen instincts. But with a furrowed brow, keeping his shoulders slouched and admitting enough details to warrant suspicion, Ryuko was none the wiser, "You possess the strength of a Keyblade Master. Your heart, although stained by unfathomable experiences, remains untainted by darkness. But determining *how* that uncouth ruffian learned such frightening magic is far more important than ending his life. I believe Beatrix taught you the difference between power and knowledge, did she not?"

A weary sigh, punctuated by guilt-filled grumbling as he faltered, purposely, upon mentioning her master's name, "However, concerning the matter at hand..."

And just like that, as expected, bewilderment replaced annoyance. Frowning deeply, not a trace of amusement in his eyes, he turned around, "... those aligned with the light would never teach that goon. Merlin. Lulu. Yen Sid. None of them would dare bestow their sacred knowledge upon such undeserving scum. Which leaves relatively few alternatives..."

Ryuko felt something snap into place, “You sayin’ that guy’s working for Ardyn?”

The elderly master nodded, allowing Ryuko to draw whatever conclusion she wished, “Considering the extent of his knowledge, Ardyn Lucis Caelum is the most likely culprit. Which is why we must capture, not kill, that man. The information he knows might be crucial if we are to stop Ardyn’s plans, whatever they might be.”

A moment passed in absolute silence as Ryuko glared into the older Keyblade wielder’s eyes.

“Fine!”

It almost hurt allowing anyone else to kick the crap out of the arrogant bastard. She wanted nothing more than to return the favor, with interest, for blowing away half her face. But she remembered Ardyn’s threat. The insane psychopath knew about Satsuki. He knew what she was looking for. And if he found Satsuki or Mako or anyone else, Ryuko didn’t know what she’d do. Merely *thinking* about Mako made her heart ache. Biting the inside of her cheek enough to draw blood, she forcibly spat out the rest of her answer, “Just try not screwing *this* up as well!”

Xehanort brushed aside the foolish comment as he took several measured paces towards the stairs. The silence was almost deafening. The emotions radiating from Ryuko’s heart easily readable. And upon passing next to the girl, the difference between their heights appreciable despite his slouched posture, he waited a moment, mouth pursed into a tight grimace, before asking another question, “Have you confronted Vanitas?”

“Tch!”

Ryuko forced out the answer, more frustrated than annoyed by the question, “Not yet! But Mickey and Ven - I mean, Ventus - fought him a little while ago.”

“I see...”

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs, brow furrowed into an intrigued frown. His amber eyes narrowed, hints of unseen annoyance dancing within their depths. Vanitas was proving to be quite the variable. While luring Ventus away from Eraqus was necessary, his former apprentice still needed to become stronger. If the X-Blade were to be forged, allowing Kingdom Hearts to return from the darkness, Ventus's light needed to match Vanitas's darkness. Something that wouldn't occur underneath Eraqus's guidance, not when his old friend was partially aware of his plans.

“... Vanitas sought out Eraqus's other student?”

The question hung heavy on the tip of his tongue. It was too soon for Vanitas to seek out Ventus. If his apprentice perished before his heart was ready for the reunification, the X-Blade's creation would be jeopardized, “That's indeed quite worrisome. But rest assured. Once I apprehend the ruffian, I shall inform Yen Sid and Eraqus of this development.”

“HEY!”

With a metallic *clink*, she swung the Scissor Blade onto her shoulder. Licking the corner of her mouth, Ryuko watched Xehanort pause halfway up the stairs. And when he looked over his shoulder, gruffly added, “I've had time to think about what you said. All your nonsense and stuff. It couldn't have been easy. I mean, if we switched places... if I had to kill my son or daughter... I don't think I'd be able to do it.”

“But don't think anything's changed!”

Head cocked sideways, blood still smeared in her hair, Ryuko glared at the Keyblade Master, “If I find out that bastard's escaped, I'm going to make sure you pay! Got it!?”

Xehanort stopped on the middle landing between the stairs. For a moment, she didn't know what he was going to say. There was a strange tension in the air. And then he started laughing in a weird, almost grandfatherly way.

"It would appear you take after Beatrix more than anticipated."

Ryuko didn't know what to say as Xehanort finished walked up the stairs, disappearing into the darkness leading back to town. Hell, what could she say? She didn't know whether that was a compliment or insult. Damn it! She didn't have anything in common with Beatrix. Not a damn thing! Maybe they shared the same sense of humor when it came to oglops. Perhaps she found Beatrix's fighting style interesting. But at the very least, he could have said something interesting instead of enigmatic bullshit!

"Ugh!"

Left alone with nothing but her thoughts and flowing rivers of water for company, Ryuko rubbed her temple. Why the hell couldn't she catch a freaking break? First Ardyn appears out nowhere. And now a random asshole with a massive chip on his shoulders threatens to blow up Radiant Garden. At the rate things were going, Vanitas was going to ambush her on the way back to town. Which, while great since it meant finally kicking his ass, only proved someone out there was screwing with her.

"Terra better not have fucked things up with Aqua or I'm gonna be freaking pissed!"

Last edited: Jan 29, 2019

Chapter 7.5

It seems to me that Xehanort's original explanation for Vanitas's existence wouldn't hold up in my story. Given that there are other Keyblade Masters out there, Terra would simply need to run into one... or talk with Yen Sid... and Xehanort would suddenly find himself having to explain WHY he removed Ventus's darkness. I'm not saying it wouldn't hold up. But making things more complicated than necessary has a tendency to backfire. And by keeping the story simple - his apprentice went insane and gave himself over to darkness - Xehanort eliminates more than the barest suspicions. Of course, the other masters would be suspicious of how Vanitas succumbed to darkness underneath his watch. But he could, in that scenario, claim any of them, given that most masters treat their students as if they were their own children, would overlook most faults until it was too late.

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/f/f2/The_Masked_Boy_Battle_01_KH_BBS.png/800px-The_Masked_Boy_Battle_01_KH_BBS.png]

[“Pathetic!”](#)

Terra leapt backwards when the masked teenager blinked out of existence before teleporting overhead, darkness clinging to his Keyblade. As the opposing Keyblade sliced through the ground where he'd been standing, kicking up shards of rock that cut into his arms and face, the subsequent explosion knocked him off his feet. He grunted when his back collided with the street. A sharp hiss tore through his throat as he rolled across the ground, his shoulder eventually slamming into the wall.

“Damn it!”

Pushing through the pain, he propped Earthshaker under his body and vaulted onto his feet. As blood streamed down the left side of his

face, dripping onto his shirt, Terra glared straight into Vanitas's concealed eyes. The guy was mocking him. But worse than that, Vanitas was holding back. That much was apparent. He didn't spend years training beneath someone as strong as Master Eraqus without learning a few important facts. Holding onto the wall as he stumbled forward, a purposeful lurch designed to catch Vanitas by surprise, he rapidly broke into a full-blown sprint, ochre light enveloping his Keyblade as he stopped, pivoted and slammed it against the ground.

"EARTH!!!"

Vanitas grinned at the idiotic proclamation.

As glowing cracks snaked across the courtyard from the point of impact, he flipped out of range. His boot barely touched the ground before twisting clockwise, enabling him to sharply pivot around the pillars of jagged rock erupting underneath his feet. Propelled by the darkness growing within his incomplete heart, he twisted, backflipped and danced around the naïve idiot's attack. It wasn't too difficult. For all of its power, the spell was notoriously straightforward and predictable.

And Terra was anything, if not predictable.

"Not bad..."

Laughing in the back of his throat, Vanitas smashed through the newly-formed stalagmites standing in his way before launching himself at Terra, Void Gear cloaked in writhing darkness.

"You're still weak though!"

Clang!

Sweat and blood mixed with the dirt covering his face as Terra found himself sliding backwards. It was only a few feet. But it was enough for him to understand the message. Earthshaker trembled in his

fingers as he brought his retreat into a standstill. He winced, teeth gnashed from exertion, as darkness pushed against his Keyblade.

“Too slow!”

Adjusting his grip around Earthshaker, Terra forcibly shifted Vanitas’s Keyblade sideways, redirecting the darkness-tainted streams of forked lightning into the sky. Damn it, this wasn’t working! Vanitas was too fast and strong to take in a straight fight. Master Xehanort had been right. Vanitas truly was a prodigy when it came to the Keyblade and magic. And considering Master Xehanort trained alongside Eraqus, he probably knew every trick in the book. There was nothing he could do... no technique, magic or strategy... Vanitas didn’t already know.

But what about something new?

With a defiant roar, not only at Vanitas but the darkness seeking purchase in his heart, Terra dismissed Earthshaker, cocked his arm and *punched* the masked teenager.

Hard.

A disturbing *crack* reverberated across the courtyard as Vanitas felt the punch with every fiber of his incomplete existence. The force snapped his head sideways. Cracks spiderwebbed down the right side of his helmet. He stumbled backwards, more surprised than hurt by the unexpected attack. Holding onto his cracked mask, he took another step away from the naïve idiot before laughter began welling inside his heart. That had been surprising! He didn’t think Terra had the intelligence to improvise.

“Let’s see what else you can do...”

Allowing the unspoken threat to pierce the stupidity blinding Terra, he darted leftwards, sprinting towards the nearest alley. But after running up the stairs two at a time, his confidence faltered at a shrill *beep*.

“Son of a...”

Explosions tore through the courtyard in rapid-fire succession as the Seeker Mines detonated. Columns of fire shot into the sky. The pressure wave shattered nearby windows, creating plumes of smoke visible from Hollow Bastion. Moments later, flying through the air, smoke clinging to his armor and Keyblade, Vanitas slammed into the ground. His neck bent at an awkward angle, helmet twisted sideways.

But with an annoyed grunt, he huffed and leapt back onto his feet, neck snapping back into place.

“Tch! Aren’t you clever.”

Loosely holding his Keyblade, Vanitas glared at Terra, concealed eyes narrowing at the idiot’s expression. Seeker Mines, huh? That hadn’t been expected. He honestly didn’t think the moron was that smart. Then again, the day was just full of surprises. Still, something was wrong with the big picture. A spell like that wasn’t normally used in hand-to-hand combat. It wasn’t practical, let alone smart, since anyone with the slightest shred of intelligence could avoid them. They were traps, not something any half-decent fighter created on a whim while fighting for his pathetic life.

Which left only one possibility.

Pivoting sharply, he swung Void Gear, deflecting the salvo of razor-sharp icicles.

“There you are...”

His eyes tracked upwards until the blue haired Keyblade wielder standing on a roof across the courtyard was in full view. So, this was their strategy. Smart. He’d admit that much. They actually took *him* by surprise. But nothing changed. Because despite whatever half-formed plans were circulating between their hearts, he’d been wondering where the Keyblade Master ran off to. Fighting the idiot

one-on-one was fun, but the battle had begun losing its luster. If he was going to hang their corpses in a suitable place, he didn't want to search too far.

Of course, the geezer did want Terra for his own plans. Which wasn't any fun. But considering what *he* got out of cooperating, keeping the moron alive wouldn't be that -

"FIRE!"

He spun around, slicing through the homing fireballs erupting from the idiot's Keyblade. But as the final embers faded into nothingness, he grimaced. That had been too easy. No way was the moron *this* goddamn pathetic.

It was almost like -

The sound of metal boots alongside the faintest brush of magic caught his undivided attention.

Damn it! He thought the girl was acting as the distraction for the idiot, not the other way around. No wonder Terra's attack had been absurdly weak! The bastard had been trying to keep him preoccupied! In slow motion, magic coursed throughout Void Gear as he pivoted, gravel and broken rocks grinding against each other underneath his boots. Licks of purple flames clung to his Keyblade as he launched himself at Aqua, covering the distance between them in a fraction of a second. But the last thing he saw, inches from permanently taking down the blue haired girl, was a brilliant bluish-white light shining from the Keyblade held over her head.

And then a deathly cold.

"Ha... ha... ha..."

Vertigo swept over Aqua as she collapsed onto one knee. Holding onto Rainfell, the Keyblade propped against the ground for support, beads of sweat dripped down her cheeks despite the growing chill in

the air. With every ragged pant, pale wisps of water vapor condensed in front of her mouth. And she glared, unnatural coldness in her eyes, at the masked teenager trapped inside the enormous glacier stretching across most of the town square. The blue-white ice shimmered in the afternoon sunlight. Fog and mist spread along the ground as minute imperfections shone brilliantly.

“I can see... why Ryuko... had trouble... dealing with him...”

As she knelt in front of the craggy iceberg, she pressed her hand against the ground, goosebumps slowly spreading up her arm. Glacier was difficult. One of the most difficult spells she knew. Even with preparation and time, the necessary requirements drained everything she had left. If not for Terra, she wasn't certain it would have worked.

But despite the exhaustion wracking her body, she was immensely relieved.

After taking another few seconds to finish catching her breath, she stumbled back onto her feet. Holding onto Rainfell, the Keyblade bouncing within tired fingers, she walked towards Terra, who was exhausted in his own right. Her steps were slow. She simply focused on placing one foot in front of the other. But even so, before giving Terra an exhausted smile, she glared at the masked boy trapped inside the massive glacier, as if something was wrong, “You alright?”

“Yeah, I'm fine.”

Terra hesitantly lowered Earthshaker when it became apparent, despite the growing sense of wrongness in his heart, Vanitas wasn't escaping. At least, not anytime soon. The Keyblade shimmered in the sunlight. His fingers, burned, bruised and bloodied by the horrendous battle, hurt. But he remembered *why* he'd come back. Ryuko had given him this opportunity to make things right. And a little pain, no matter how distracting, wouldn't stand in his way, “Look, Aqua, about what I said earlier...”

Even knowing what he wanted to say, the words still struggled to form, “I was wrong. About everything. What I said to you, I didn’t mean any of it.”

“What? No! No! No... it’s my fault.”

The abruptness of Terra’s apology threw Aqua through a loop. She felt her heart skip a beat. Her eyes widened, breath hitching in the back of her throat, “Terra, you, me and Ven, we’ve been through so much together. I want to trust you. More than anything, I want to believe you’re doing the right thing. But I’ve... we’ve... seen people who given themselves over to the darkness.”

She stared at the ground, hand pressed against her heart, “That’s why I’m worried about you. So please, tell me what you’re trying to do. Why you’ve stepped closer to the darkness.”

“Do you remember one of the first things Master Eraqus taught us?”

A bitterly cold breeze, wafting off the glacier, swept through the town square as Terra turned around and stared at Hollow Bastion, “Light must always triumph over darkness. To grow stronger, one must destroy the darkness. For as long as I can remember, I’ve followed that teaching. We... you, me and Ven... thought that was the truth. But after speaking with Master Beatrix and Xehanort, I’m starting to think that’s wrong.”

“Terra...”

He heard Aqua. It was impossible not to. And yet, he ignored the *pleading* tone of her voice, forcing himself to continue, “Ignoring the darkness is foolish. It exists inside almost every heart. We’ve seen that. I’ve... I’ve experienced that firsthand. That’s why I’m searching for a way to control it.”

The words were coming easier, “Not to use it... or get stronger... but to protect you, Ven, Master Eraqus and Ryuko.”

Guilt and shame eroded the barriers around Aqua's heart as her lower lip trembled, "Terra, I -"

["How touching..."](#)

It started with a faint crack, something that grew louder with every passing second. But in one final explosion, the glacial ice imprisoning Vanitas shattered. Darkness flickered between the chunks of ice, clinging desperately to them like ephemeral flames. And as he stepped forth from his temporary prison, Vanitas swept his Keyblade between Aqua and Terra, darkness oozing from the cog-like teeth, "It's enough to make me sick."

Terra glared at Vanitas, exhaustion pressing heavily on his shoulders. Maybe he couldn't cast Glacier himself. But the spell was still extremely powerful. One of the strongest Aqua, or even Master Eraqus, knew. If Vanitas managed to escape, things were about to take a turn for the worse, "You're awfully confident for someone who's about to lose!"

"And why wouldn't I be?"

The geezer might want Ryuko dead. But he couldn't care less about the punk. Sure, she was strong. Surprisingly so. Anyone who could go toe-to-toe with Ardyn Izunia and survive had to be powerful. And she'd only grown stronger over the last few weeks. But *he* was here to kill the blue haired Keyblade Master. Not for Xehanort's plans, or because they might need a backup, but because the longer she remained out and about, searching the worlds like a love-starved puppy, the lower the chance Ventus became strong enough for their reunion.

Which brought him back to *why* he was humoring Terra.

Amusement bubbled within his incomplete heart at the naïve idiot's bluff. Anyone with half a brain could tell the moron was on his last legs. It was goddamn pathetic, "Of course, that could change if you stopped holding back."

When the guy flinched, more ashamed than angered by the truth, Vanitas chuckled, "There's no point pretending. Darkness lurks inside your heart. It's simply a matter of time until you lose control. You'll kill everyone you care about. Every. Single. Person. Face it, Terra. Your so-called friends are better off without you."

"Stop it!"

Shouting loud enough that her voice echoed, Aqua stabbed Rainfell at Vanitas, the Keyblade trembling in her fingers, "You don't know anything about Terra!"

"And *you* do?"

The question stopped the Keyblade Master cold, giving him more than enough time to add insult to injury, "How pathetic. You were so *ready* to believe the worst about Terra. So, why don't you just admit it. You thought Terra was turning into me. Or, better yet, Ardyn Izunia."

Aqua's mouth opened and closed at the accusation, but the words refused to come out, "I..."

"Enough!"

Terra stepped in front of Aqua, fingers gripping Earthshaker tightly enough that his knuckles turned white, "Master Xehanort told me everything about you!"

Not a single word spewing from the naïve idiot's mouth possessed the slightest concept of accuracy. It was moronic. But according to the old coot, they needed a bullet-proof story for the other Keyblade Masters. Beatrix. Lulu. Yen Sid. Insane powerhouses who could kill him in the blink of an eye. Beatrix, for example, could strike him down before a single Unversed formed. And while he would normally disagree with Xehanort on matter of principle, for the time being, he was willing to go along with the stupid story.

If it made reuniting with Ventus that much easier, who was he to argue?

“Oh? Did he now?”

Void Gear twitched as he rolled his neck, corded muscles popping into place, “The geezer couldn’t keep his mouth shut, could he?”

“How could you!?”

As expected, mocking someone Terra believed to have his best interests... who understood what it was like to have darkness inside his heart... worked perfectly. The frustration already simmering inside the naïve idiot’s heart exploded into reality. And when it came out, forced between clenched teeth, Vanitas allowed the criticism to wash over him. Outright ignoring the undeserved hatred directed his way, not just from Terra but the Keyblade Master desperately searching for the slightest opening, he softly chuckled at the moron’s expression, “How could I *what*? You’re going to need to be a little more specific.”

Underneath that righteous indignation, so misplaced and pathetic, was darkness. It was magnificent. It pushed him forward, something he would have done even if the other idiot asked the question, “After all, I’ve done *a lot* of things. Just ask Ryuko. Oh wait, that’s right. I destroyed her world, didn’t I?”

“Ven was your brother!”

Terra remembered everything Master Xehanort confessed about Vanitas. The elderly master’s despondent pleas to end his fallen apprentice’s torment resonated in his heart. And standing in front of Vanitas, having to listen to him *brag* about his nightmarish achievements was infuriating. It made sense why Xehanort was worried about him. The master must have thought he would fall prey to the darkness inside his heart, “He looked up to you! He wanted to be like you! And you tried killing him!”

“Ven’s related... to him?”

This was the first time Aqua heard *anything* about Ven being related to this monster. She couldn’t believe what Terra was saying. Ven was his brother? Ven was friendly. His heart was full of light. Nothing like this... this... person. But the more she thought about it, forced to listen to the monster’s laughter, the more everything made sense. The masked boy attempting to kill Ven might explain the strange loss of memory. It explained why Master Xehanort brought him to their world. If Ven really had been in danger, the Land of Departure was one of the safest worlds.

Now she understood why Master Eraqus had been worried when Ven chased after Terra.

He must have known *something* about Ven’s past.

“Ventus... boy, that brings me back.”

Somewhere in the Realm of Light, on a world full of clueless morons, the contempt and hatred oozing from his incomplete heart spawned countless Unversed, “He couldn’t put anything in perspective. Always had to play the hero. Even against me. Heh... my only regret is not being able to shatter his heart completely.”

Aqua paled to a deathly white. She’d known Vanitas was insane from the moment he appeared. Anyone who destroyed an entire world... and took *pleasure* from it... had to be. But this was beyond disgusting. Her mind couldn’t wrap around it. Grinding her teeth, she angrily swung Rainfell until the Keyblade was aimed squarely between the masked youth’s eyes, the waterdrop-like keychain jingling, “You monster! We’re going to make sure you never hurt anyone ever again!”

“You? Don’t make me laugh.”

Vanitas allowed himself to fall into a familiar stance, one formed from countless months of agony and torture, “Neither of you weaklings

has what it takes to stop me.”

[“Oh? Is that a fact?”](#)

Aqua’s heart almost skipped a beat. Her breath hitched. But to some measure of relief, she was not the only one caught off guard. Terra was equally surprised. And, to her shock, as was the masked boy. The voice was cold and direct. Possessing presence and authority more along the lines of Master Eraqus or another Keyblade Master than herself. For a moment, long enough to tear her eyes away from Vanitas, she glanced over her shoulder.

And her eyes promptly widened.

“Who are you?”

Marching in a firm yet steady pace across the extensively damaged courtyard, face framed by long black hair reaching more than halfway down her back, was a teenager roughly about her age. Each *clack* of her heeled boots against the ground, rhythmic sounds almost unnaturally synchronized with the subtle swaying of her hair, was unnerving. The open black jacket fluttered in the wind. Thick eyebrows were knitted together into an unreadable expression. And cold, steel-blue eyes narrowed as one gloved hand reached for the ever-so-familiar blade strapped against her back.

Clack!

Without tearing her gaze away from the megalomaniac, Satsuki Kiryuin unsheathed the Scissor Blade, light shimmering off the crimson surface, “Allow *me* to prove you wrong.”

Last edited: Sep 5, 2018

Unknown Report 7

Unknown Report 7

"You son of a bitch!"

Braig didn't bother waiting for the bastard's answer. If the geezer even *had* one, that was. Stomping across the gardens, he fired shot after shot, hoping to hit something important, "You think this is funny?"

Even when a magical barrier deflected every single arrow, causing one of the ricochets to nearly scrap his cheek, he didn't stop firing. Not for a second. His finger continued depressing the trigger. And his remaining eye, bloodshot from successfully dulled pain, viciously narrowed, "What the hell happened? Where was Terra? Wasn't *he* supposed to save you?"

Standing on the precipice between the gardens and the tranquil waters hundreds of feet below, hands clasped against the small of his back, Xehanort scoffed, "... a minor miscalculation."

"A miscalculation!?"

Despite the arrowgun trembling from the back of his head, Xehanort didn't bother turning around. Still holding his finger firmly against the trigger, but not hard enough to shoot another arrow, Braig snarled, "As if! I didn't sign up to be collateral damage! And I sure as hell didn't agree to any fine print about getting my ass kicked by a freaking monster!"

"A monster?"

Xehanort afforded the thug an errant chuckle, "I saw no such thing."

"No way was that keyslinger normal! Or even human!"

The guard's finger tightened another notch. A bead of sweat trickled down his face. At such close range, no magic in all the worlds was capable of blocking his shot. It would take only a single squeeze to end Xehanort's life. But he didn't. He refused. It would ruin everything. And yet, his expression, twisted by pain and anger, further contorted when the geezer's smirk broadened, "You knew? All along, you knew who she was! What she was! Spill it! Tell me what's going on or I'm ending our partnership right here, right now!"

Shink!

Out of nowhere, a Keyblade was pressing against the underside of his chin.

"Okay! Okay... let's not do anything stupid.

Swallowing the lump in his throat at the coldness and unmerciful light in the geezer's eyes, Braig desperately looked for an exit. The old coot really wasn't bluffing. One more word out of line and he could kiss his butt - or much, much worse - goodbye, "Hey! I can still be useful! You still need me to do something, right? Just say the word and I'll do it! No problem! Just don't forget to hold up your end of the bargain, alright?"

For a moment, the Keyblade pressed a little harder against his chin. Sweat continued trickling into the bloodied bandages wrapped around his head. But to his immense relief, after what felt like an eternity, Xehanort slowly lowered the demonic-looking weapon.

"Humph."

Dismissing No Name with nothing more than the slightest flutter of his heart, Xehanort turned his back upon the treacherous guard. The man's anger with Ryuko was palpable. As was the darkness simmering within his greedy heart. But frustration or not, Braig posed little threat. Perhaps if the man had defeated Ryuko instead of the other way around, he would think differently. And yet, this was reality. Thus, he cared little about the man's petulant whining. Despite his

prostrations to the contrary concerning his importance, the guard was only one of several potential vessels.

One that could change at a moment's notice.

"Even after years of exploration... visiting dozens upon dozens of worlds... I've never come across anyone quite like Ryuko."

Of course, as for all things, he needed to be cautious. Such a plan, however meticulous and strategized, necessitated constant attentiveness. It would take but a single Master discovering his intentions to ruins years of planning, "Her world must have been fascinating."

"Yeah..."

Now that his heart was no longer threatened by the old coot, Braig grumbled under his breath, "She's *real* fascinating."

"You've undoubtedly noticed the peculiar nature of her body."

Pointing at the right side his face - or rather, the bloodied bandages covering the jagged scar and missing eye - Braig snarled, "In case *you* weren't paying attention, I was busy keeping my head and shoulders firmly attached. But yeah, I saw *it*. Ain't like I'm ever gonna forget something so... so... disturbing, you know."

Xehanort, if he cared about his subordinate's brush with death, didn't show the slightest hint of compassion, "Unlike you and me, her body isn't composed of flesh and blood. Yet instead of darkness acting as the medium for her simulacrum, as is the case for Vanitas, there's something else. It's the source of her strength. At most times, it's concealed. Hidden underneath the guise of normalcy. But during your final clash with Ryuko, that illusion momentarily shattered, allowing her true nature to temporarily surface."

"Wait..."

Braig couldn't remember the last time - hell, any time - the geezer had been this perplexed, "... then *what* the hell is she?"

"I don't know."

The answer utterly surprised Braig, "What do you mean *you don't know?*"

"It's none of your concern."

Despite the limitations of his knowledge, Xehanort could barely contain the excitement bubbling inside his heart. To bear witness to something like Ryuko, a being unlike anything else in the Realm of Light, or even the Realm of Darkness, was exhilarating. There was truly nobody else like her. And for that reason, he would have liked nothing more than investigating any and all potential sources of her power. Yet, much to his consternation, Vanitas's interference had prevented exploration of her world. And the girl's reluctance to divulge more than the slightest hints about her world, even to Yen Sid and Beatrix, meant second-hand information was woefully inadequate.

"But, I suppose, you kept up your end of the bargain."

Smirking faintly as he turned around, Xehanort summoned No Name back into his hand, "And for that, I shall grant what you most desire."

Original Version

"You son of a bitch!"

Braig didn't bother waiting for the bastard's answer. If the geezer even *had* one, that is. Stomping down the walkway towards Xehanort, he fired shot after shot, hoping to hurt something important, "You think this is freaking funny?"

Even when an invisible barrier deflected every single one of his shots, he didn't stop firing. His fingers continued depressing the trigger. And his remaining eye, bloodshot from the pain dulled

thanks to ample use of healing potions, narrowed, "What the hell happened back there? Where was Terra? Wasn't *he* supposed to save you?"

Standing on the precipice between the walkway and the tranquil waters hundreds of feet below, both hands clasped against the small of his hunched back, Xehanort scoffed, "... a minor miscalculation."

"A miscalculation? AS IF!"

Still holding his finger against the trigger, but not enough to continue shooting, Braig snarled when the geezer didn't budge. Despite the arrowgun trembling inches from the back of his head, Xehanort didn't bother turning around. The guy was utterly relaxed. But why? At such close range, there was no magic in all the worlds capable of blocking his shot. One squeeze and the bastard's brains would be blown into millions of pieces, "I didn't sign up to be collateral damage! No goddamn way! And I sure as hell didn't agree to getting my ass kicked by a freaking monster!"

Xehanort chuckled under his breath, "I saw no such thing..."

"No way was that keyslinger normal!"

He tightened his finger another notch, one errant twitch from ending the geezer's life, "As if! Not a goddamn chance! So, spill it! Tell me what's going on or I'm ending our partnership right here, right now!"

Clang!

His breath hitched when a Keyblade materialized out of nowhere. The arrowgun clattered to the ground when Xehanort turned around, pressing the weapon against the underside of his chin. Quickly taking a step backwards, hands raised into the air above his head, Braig stiffened at the coldness and unmerciful light in the geezer's amber eyes.

“Okay! Okay... let’s not do anything stupid.”

Swallowing the lump in his throat, sweat dripped down the side of his face as he desperately searched for an exit. The old coot wasn’t bluffing. No way. One more word out of line and he could kiss his butt - or much, much *worse* - goodbye, “Hey! I can still be useful! You still need me to do something, right? Just say the word and I’ll do it! No problem! Just don’t forget to hold up your end of the bargain, alright?”

Sweat continued trickling into the bloodied bandages wrapped around his head. For a moment, when the Keyblade pressed a little harder against his chin, Braig thought Xehanort wasn’t buying his apology.

But to his immense relief, the geezer lowered the demonic Keyblade.

“The girl you fought. Her name’s Ryuko.”

Dismissing No Name with nothing more than the slightest flutter of his heart, Xehanort turned his back upon the treacherous guard. The man’s anger with Ryuko was palpable. As was the darkness simmering within his greedy heart. But frustration or not, Braig posed little threat. Perhaps if the man had defeated Ryuko instead of the other way around, he would think differently. And yet, this was reality. Thus, he cared little about the man’s petulant whining. Despite his prostrations to the contrary concerning his importance, the guard was only one of several potential vessels.

One that could change at a moment’s notice.

“Even after years of exploration... visiting dozens upon dozens of worlds... I’ve never come across anyone with such an interesting name.”

Of course, as for all things, he needed to be cautious. Such a plan, however meticulous and strategized, necessitated constant

attentiveness. It would take but a single Master discovering his intentions to ruins years of planning, "Her world must have been fascinating."

"Yeah..."

Now that his heart was no longer threatened by the old coot, Braig grumbled, "She's *real* fascinating."

"I'm sure you noticed something odd about her body..."

Pointing at the right side his face - or rather, the bloodied bandages covering the jagged scar and missing eye - Braig snarled, "In case you weren't paying attention, I was more worried about not *dying*. But yeah, I saw something. Ain't like I'm gonna forget something so... so... disturbing, you know."

Xehanort, if he cared about his subordinate's close brush with death, didn't show the slightest hint of compassion. Instead of acknowledging anything, he merely chuckled, amusement clinging to his voice, "Unlike you and myself, Ryuko's body is not composed of flesh and blood. The closest comparison is Vanitas. Yet instead of darkness acting as the basic medium for the simulacrum, there's something else. During your final clash with Ryuko, that illusion was momentarily shattered, allowing her true nature to temporarily surface."

Braig swallowed the lump in his throat. No wonder he'd felt something *off* about the girl, "Wait... then *what* the hell is she?"

"I don't know."

The answer utterly surprised Braig, "What do you mean *you don't know*?"

"It's none of your concern."

Despite the limitations of his knowledge, Xehanort could barely contain the excitement bubbling inside his heart. To bear witness to something like Ryuko, a being unlike anything else in the Realm of Light, or even the Realm of Darkness, was exhilarating. There was truly nobody else like her. And for that reason, he would have liked nothing more than investigating any and all potential sources of her power. Yet, much to his consternation, Vanitas's interference had prevented exploration of her world. And the girl's reluctance to divulge more than the slightest hints about her world, even to Yen Sid and Beatrix, meant second-hand information was woefully inadequate.

"But, I suppose, you kept up your end of the bargain."

Smirking faintly as he turned around, Xehanort summoned No Name back into his hand, "And for that, I shall grant what you most desire."

Last edited: Jan 29, 2019

Chapter 7.6

Here's what most of you have been waiting for. Of course, as you might notice, I rewrote the last few paragraphs from scratch. And there's more to come.

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/7/7d/EP18-09_Satsuki_Kiryuin.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140512194124]

Vanitas allowed himself to fall into a familiar stance, “Neither of you weaklings has what it takes to stop me.”

[“Oh? Is that a fact?”](#)

Aqua’s heart nearly skipped a beat. The voice was cold and direct. Possessing presence and authority more along the lines of Master Eraqus or another Keyblade Master than someone like herself. For a moment, just long enough to tear her eyes away from Vanitas and notice Terra’s bewilderment, she cautiously glanced over her shoulder, Rainfell slowly moving into a more confident position.

“Who are you?”

Steadily marching across the damaged courtyard, face framed by bangs of long black hair reaching more than halfway down her back, was a teenager about her age. Each *clack* of their heeled boots against the ground, rhythmic sounds almost unnaturally synchronized with the swaying of their hair, was mystifying. The open black jacket gently fluttered in the wind. A pair of thick eyebrows were knitted together. And cold, steel-blue eyes narrowed as one arm slowly, no movement wasted, reached for the familiar blade sheathed on their back.

“Stand down. Your assistance won’t be necessary.”

Terra *recognized* the sword strapped to her back. He would need to be an idiot not to. The handle might be different from Ryuko's, but there was no mistaking how familiar the weapon was. Against all odds, despite the bewilderment in his heart, he was looking at another Scissor Blade.

Which could only mean one thing.

"Like hell it isn't!"

Before she could march past him and Aqua, Terra snapped out his arm. For a moment, their eyes locked. Her cold, steel-blue eyes stared into his own. And the unstated message to get out of her way almost made him lower his arm. But he didn't. He refused. Because if she was who he thought she was, letting her fight Vanitas was out of the question, "Aqua and I can take him down."

"Terra's right."

A small trail of blood snaked from the wound on Aqua's cheek as she raised Rainfell, the metallic blue Keyblade shimmering with pure light, "You need to get out of here!"

"Your concerns are noted..."

When the teenager didn't heed the unstated warning to stand aside, Satsuki Kiryuin slapped away his outstretched arm. Perhaps his unwanted interjection was well-meaning. But it did not matter. Not in the slightest, "... and perhaps you're correct."

Clack!

With the *snap-click* of her heeled boots, Satsuki grasped the Scissor Blade and, in one smooth motion, unsheathed the hardened Life Fiber weapon, "But retribution for his crimes must be absolved through MY hands!"

"Hmph... *you?*"

An arrogant chortle echoed within the confined space of his helmet. The ridiculous assertion was downright stupid. On any other day, against any other idiot, he would have ignored the comment without a second thought. But he still *remembered* the experience of that Scissor Blade, not the other one, sliding between his ribs. It had been extremely painful. Something he was unlikely to forget any time soon. To think she, of all people, would reappear out of nowhere. He'd honestly believed she succumbed to darkness alongside the rest of her miserable world.

But he was getting ahead of himself.

After all, despite standing at ground zero when darkness devoured her world, Ryuko had somehow survived, mind, body and heart.

"Don't get ahead of yourself."

Rolling his neck until the joints popped one by one, he flipped Void Gear around his fingers. He didn't know how this girl survived, but something so trivial didn't matter. She was just another warm-up. Something to pass the time. But unlike the naïve idiot and, on second thought, the Keyblade Master, she was one hundred percent expendable. Which made everything *fun*, "Maybe you're strong. Or maybe you're not. I suppose we'll find out when I'm dragging your corpse through the streets."

"How arrogant!"

Satsuki's fingers settled around the circular handle, which had, until only recently, belonged to one of her most hated enemies. Anger shimmered in the depths of her heart as she hefted the Scissor Blade skyward, shoulders tightening and muscles settling into a familiar stance, "Through my ignorance, you survived our last encounter. I shall not repeat that mistake."

"That's *some* bluster."

There was something strange about the girl's passion. A familiar feeling in his fragmented heart. She was too cocky. And yet, Vanitas couldn't find the emotional capacity to care. Not in the slightest. In fact, he was actually annoyed by her declaration. It didn't matter if she talked a big game. No matter what words spewed from her mouth, she was nothing more than another weakling who thought they were strong, "But unless you can back up that bluff, you're wasting my time."

["Bluffing, am I?"](#)

Although her voice didn't drop so much as an octave, Satsuki glowered at the ill-conceived insult. And concealed from view, she prepared herself. Joints locked into position. She took a deep breath, expression unwavering, while silently sliding her left foot forward, "In that case, allow me to rectify your grave misconceptions."

Clack!

One step halved the distance between them.

Clack!

Another step brought her within arm's reach.

Clack!

As her heeled boot impacted the ground, Satsuki immediately shifted her center of mass rightward. The change of momentum twisted her body counterclockwise, allowing her to deftly avoid the strange blade swinging in a downward arc towards her heart.

Clack!

A fourth step, small yet important, brought her within the masked individual's guard. Her heel *clacked* against the ground next to his foot, preventing him from retreating. Thick bangs of black hair swayed in the wind as she watched, never blinking, eyes slightly

narrowing, the darkness writhing around the Keyblade. Her mouth twitched at the purple-black substance trailing behind the weapon, momentarily lingering before fading out of existence.

It was disgusting.

But the Scissor Blade shimmered. Crimson light whispered across the razor-sharp edge. And with an ear-deafening *clash* of metal upon metal, audible not only across the courtyard but echoing throughout Radiant Garden, she pinned his Keyblade against the ground.

“What’s wrong?”

As the metallic ringing faded into the background, her eyebrows furrowed in obvious fury. She was hunched over, the difference between their respective heights noticeable. The Scissor Blade trembled against the Keyblade as their shoulders brushed. She observed her reflection on the opaque helmet, glimpses of concealed amber visible within. He was strong. And that disturbing strength wasn’t born from Life Fibers, something which meant less with every passing day. But it was obvious he was exhausted. His movements were sluggish and attacks predictable.

Even if he *was* more powerful... even if his darkness stacked the odds against her... as things stood, *she* had the advantage!

“Am I *still* wasting your time?”

She locked her elbows, preventing the Keyblade from moving. Not even an inch. Her right foot slipped. But she quickly adjusted, “Your silence speaks volumes. Perhaps you’re afraid of the answer.”

“Me? Afraid of *you*?”

A quick jaunt between worlds gave Vanitas some breathing room. But instead of having any time to think, he was forced to lean backwards, spine bending in a way impossible for most people, when the Scissor Blade sliced dangerously close to his neck. The

sword scraped against the underside of his mask. And in that instant, before he leapt backwards, planting one hand against the ground for support, something impossible had flickered within his damaged heart.

Fear.

“Don’t make me laugh!”

He breathed deeply, more out of memory of who he used to be than necessity. But when he saw Void Gear shaking in his fingers, he violently suffocated the pathetic reaction, creating enough negative emotion to spawn dozens of powerful Unversed across the Realm of Light. What the hell was going on? What sort of magic was this? There was no way he could feel such annoyance so quickly! Any weakling could train themselves. Even the naïve idiots learned a few things from their worthless master. But he was better than those morons! He was better than anyone! He was better than Ventus!

And once he reunited with Ventus, not even Xehanort could stand against him!

Darting sideways around the courtyard, he angrily snapped Void Gear into position, darkness writhing between the gear-like teeth. If she wanted to play mind games, then fine! Without hesitation, hatred circulating through his heart, he clenched his fingers, unleashing enough firepower, literally and figuratively, to force the two morons into action. He watched, modest satisfaction in his laughter, when Terra leapt backwards. He almost chuckled when the blue haired Keyblade Master, so confident and sure of herself, swung her Keyblade, summoning a translucent barrier.

Something that drained every ounce of remaining mana within her body.

But the only person he *really* wanted dead was slicing through the fireballs, Scissor Blade nothing more than a crimson blur.

And that look in her eyes...

Vanitas pivoted as the projectiles detonated across the surrounding landscape, bathing everything within vibrant waves of crimson, orange and purple. As he abruptly shifted, he heard horrified screams coming from nearby streets. But he was only focused on one thing. And one thing only. Darkness flickered around his body, oozing from his incomplete existence, as he quickly closed the distance between himself and the girl. Void Gear trembled, not from fear, but undying hatred, when it struck her Scissor Blade with every ounce of power remaining at his disposal.

Rapid-fire strikes. Counter attacks to her counter attacks. Parries and ripostes. Every technique he remembered from when he'd been part of Ventus. As well as several new techniques learned underneath the geezer's torturous training.

All of which she effortlessly countered.

"But I'll play your little game."

Another parry reunited his Keyblade with her Scissor Blade, their faces separated by mere inches, "Why would I ever be afraid of *you*?"

"It's blatantly obvious!"

Satsuki refused to stagger. She refused to allow her back to so much as *bend*. The pressure against the Scissor Blade was tremendous. She could not deny that. But through the glowing explosion of light and darkness clashing between their respective blades, she tensed her shoulders. She clenched her teeth, brow furrowed into a frustrated glower. And slowly but surely through nothing more than her own determination... her own refusal to allow this monster so much as a single step forward... she forced the opposing weapon away from her face, inch by inch.

"Your stance is too tense! Your posture stricken with confusion!"

The physical force accompanying the passion exploding from her heart forced Vanitas backwards. And in that brief window of opportunity, she rushed forward, returning the previous exchange, but on *her* terms, "Claim otherwise all you wish. But you cannot fool *me*!"

Her voice grew progressively louder with increasing authority as she pushed the opposing weapon closer and closer to the masked individual, "Someone such as yourself... a being who gave themselves over to darkness... not only fears people who refuse to lower themselves to such depravity, but your very existence!"

"... is that it?"

For what felt like the first time in years, Vanitas found himself chuckling. That was it? That was her answer? Even with Void Gear inching towards his face, he couldn't help but laugh at the stupidity, "After all that bluster, I expected something with a little more... substance. Guess I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up."

"Until the blade of my heart is broken!"

Pulling herself backwards, Satsuki ducked underneath the Keyblade. The legendary weapon sliced inches from her nose. It brushed against strands of hair. And as she softly sighed, the sound echoing in the deepest recesses of her heart, she planted one hand on the ground, spun around and *smashed* her boot against the underside of Vanitas's chin.

"Until my very existence is extinguished!"

As the accompanying force behind the blow sent the masked youth careening several meters above the courtyard, her arm snapped outwards. Pushing herself off the ground, she easily reached the same height, Scissor Blade intent on removing his head from his shoulders. Only he somehow adjusted himself midflight. The instant before the hardened Life Fiber weapon ended his monstrous

existence, Vanitas parried the finished blow, giving him more than enough time to reach the ground.

Clack!

Her heeled boots *clacked* as she landed in a kneeling crouch. A brief respite. Just long enough to catch her breath. But when something strange whispered against her heart, she vaulted sideways. With dust and smoke trailing from her pants, she flipped and dodged across the courtyard, constantly staying one step ahead of the dark lightning exploding from the masked individual's weapon. The arcing electricity slammed into the ground. It shot forth in deadly tendrils, each passing no more than an inch from her body.

Turning sharply, the masked youth's laughter ringing in her ears, she noticed the two Keyblade wielders in the distance rushing towards her, intent on interfering.

And with a determined snarl, she slashed downwards, splintering the lightning magic upon the Scissor Blade's razor-sharp edge.

"For what you've done to my world!"

As the last traces of scintillating magic twinkled out of existence, she hefted the Scissor Blade into a familiar stance, one born from years of torturous training, "I shall not rest until you lay dead at my feet!"

"Hmph."

Vanitas dropped all pretense of amusement at the annoying declaration. This was no longer *fun*. Popping the muscles in his neck, he stepped backwards, darkness writhing beneath his feet, "You're stubborn, I'll give you that."

Clack!

Racing across the courtyard, Satsuki's eyes narrowed when the Scissor Blade sliced through nothing but cobblestone. In that brief

moment between successive steps, her opponent sunk into the darkness underneath his feet. For what felt like an eternity, she knelt on the ground, both hands clasping the Scissor Blade, steel-blue eyes searching for the slightest disturbance whispering against her heart.

The brief flicker of darkness was the first confession.

The abhorrent power disrupted her concentration. It allowed her to detect, at the last possible opportunity, the masked youth reemerging into reality. Out of the corner of her eye, between bangs of hair swaying in the wind, Satsuki observed his surprise attack with callous disregard. She noticed the shadows clinging to his flesh-like armor. She watched the darkness burst forth from the ground akin to a high-pressure geyser, brushing against her heart with the subtlety of a jackhammer.

Shink!

“Did you truly believe I’d fall for something so amateurish?”

There was a wet gurgle. An almost surprised grunt. But as something viscous dripped down the Scissor Blade, Satsuki paid little attention to the additional weight. Across the damaged courtyard, she heard the blue haired woman’s astonished gasp. And alongside that reaction, what could only be the former’s friend seemed almost relieved, if his complete lack of guilt meant anything.

“How foolish.”

Looking over her shoulder, she callously glared at the masked youth propped upon the Scissor Blade, his inhuman grunts of pain and agony mixed with unadulterated hatred, “You truly are pathetic.”

Chapter 7.7

*It's tough to put a number or ranking to Satsuki's innate power. Without Junketsu, she's not overpowered. But what about compared to Terra, Aqua and other people from Kingdom Hearts? Granted, she doesn't have a Keyblade. And her lack of formal magic training precludes knowing more than the barest number of magical spells. But even so, she has actual experience in combat. She's fought life-threatening battles against monstrous opponents that would bring pause to Keyblade Masters. After all, one of the closest analogies to Ardyn Izunia in Kill la Kill is Ragyo Kiryuin. So, if I had to give an answer, I would say that while she's not *that* much stronger than Terra and Aqua - at least, not enough that it makes a difference - her experience and sharpened mind would give Satsuki the advantage if they were to fight. Not to mention, unlike Terra and Aqua, she's not particularly hesitant about using lethal force to end battles. It's one thing to kill monsters (Unversed), but actual human life? It's not something Eraqus has actually trained them to do.*

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/0/02/EP18-07_Satsuki_Kiryuin.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140512194123]

The darkness erupting from the ground behind her feet was the first confession.

Out of the corner of her eye, between bangs of hair swaying in the wind kicked up by the apparent teleportation, Satsuki observed the surprise attack with callous disregard. She noticed the darkness clinging to his flesh-like armor. How the disgusting, almost ephemeral, substance trickled off his body akin to oily water, dissipating back into the nothingness from whence it originated. As the masked individual reappeared, weapon poised across his body in a reverse grip, the shadows burst forth like a high-pressure geyser, smashing against her heart with the subtlety of a jackhammer.

Shink!

“How foolish.”

There was a wet gurgle as she thrust the Scissor Blade between her arm and chest. An almost surprised grunt assaulted her ears. And despite something viscous slowly oozing down the weapon, Satsuki paid little attention to the additional weight pushing upon the Scissor Blade.

“As if I’d fall for something so amateurish.”

Her fingers flexed around the hardened Life Fiber weapon. A strand of black hair fell in front of her eyes as she finally decided, more from necessity than arrogance, to face the monstrous being skewered upon the sword that had, at one point, been in the possession of someone even more grotesque, “You truly are pathetic.”

“Heh...”

It started slowly in the back of his mind. The sensation built into a crescendo. Until, skewered through the heart upon the Scissor Blade, Vanitas began laughing.

Despite not having a proper body, even after the geezer’s training, it was *exceptionally* painful. Far more than it should have been. Gagging wetly when the obnoxious teenager pushed the Scissor Blade deeper into his chest, he lurched forward, blood-like darkness splattering the ground around her boots. Without the slightest trace of discomfort, he reached out, fingers grasping the air, before freezing. What the hell? Again, he tried summoning magic. He wanted nothing more than to submerge her heart with enough darkness that nothing remained for her anyone to find! But something was interfering with his attempts.

His incomplete heart sunk into the pit of his stomach.

As magic flickered around his fingers before dissipating, he realized the truth. The moment he gathered even the slightest trace of magic, something absorbed it. Devoured it. Completely consumed it.

And only an idiot wouldn't realize the cause.

"... that really all you got?"

Maniacal laughter wracked his body, causing even more darkness to gush from the otherwise lethal wound. His shoulders trembled at the truth. Latching his hand around Satsuki's wrist while pulling himself further down the Scissor Blade alongside the sickening *squelch* of metal grinding against flesh, he tilted his head, grinning beneath the opaque mask, "But I'm not surprised. After all, you're just *full* of failures, aren't you?"

Clack!

Satsuki had heard enough of his garbage.

Righteous indignation etched itself upon her heart similar to how one sharpens their knife upon a whetstone as she pivoted. The change in posture allowed her to grasp the Scissor Blade with both hands. And with that additional leverage, she reared the hardened Life Fiber weapon overhead, twisted her wrist over each other, roared at the top of her lungs before *throwing* the monstrous individual across the courtyard.

His still-living corpse skipped once across the ground before burrowing into the side of a building.

Distant birds, previously blind and deaf to the battle, took flight, soaring towards Hollow Bastion.

And yet, despite the advantageous change of fortune, Satsuki silently seethed, eyebrows knitted together.

While lacking the dangerous potency of the Grand Couturier's or her mother's, the masked youth's regeneration was problematic. Something she found herself woefully underequipped to successfully counter. She was no fool. Although their physical strengths were, in the most opportunistic definition of the word, equally matched, the battle was *far* from finished. All she needed for evidence was his continued survival.

Her last attack had, time and time again, both upon her home world and countless others, proven effective. And yet, even as the collision of his body against the building shattered both masonry and antique brickwork, Vanitas still breathed. Darkness gushed from the ragged wound piercing his chest from front to back. Yet he wasn't dead. The thought of which elicited concern. If his regeneration was this potent, perhaps even decapitations wouldn't suffice.

"Aqua, was it?"

With a silent exhale, cleared her mind. She turned her head sharply, humorless eyes focusing upon the metallic blue weapon lingering in the woman's hand. The lack of any appreciable edge should have rendered such a blade little more than a blunt mace. But appearances were deceiving. Something she'd learned quite well over the course of her journey, "Considering *he* wields a blade uncannily similar to yours..."

For a moment, her attention flickered towards Vanitas, "... can I presume there's no distinguishable difference between them?"

"Yes."

The answer passed between tired lips.

Still kneeling on the ground, Aqua struggled getting herself together. She'd never felt so tired. It was different from Master Eraqus's training. Almost completely exhausting her magic against the masked youth was a new experience. But even so, Rainfell scrapped against the ground as she slowly, and with great effort, staggered

onto her feet, sweat trickling down the contours of her face, "You could say that."

"Then might I borrow it?"

Traces of bitter coldness, remnants from Aqua's evaporated magic, chilled the air as her gaze, if briefly, shifted to the Scissor Blade. It was ironic. Although capable of suspending the regeneration of her mother and the Grand Couturier when used in tandem with its other half, her current opponent's healing was born of different origins. Making the Scissor Blade, her father's third-greatest legacy, nearly useless, "Far be it for me ask such things, but I suspect nothing else shall suffice for ending this miserable reprobate's existence."

"Sorry, the Keyblade's are sort of picky about their owners."

Struggling between staring at Vanitas's unmoving body and Satsuki, Terra shook his head, "Even if we wanted, you couldn't wield the Keyblade."

He bit the inside of his cheek when Satsuki's gaze snapped in his direction. He felt the full weight of her suspicion. Something that reminded him of Ryuko. But even so, Terra brushed her glare aside. Pressing his hand over his hear, he stalked forward, refusing to back down, "That's why you shouldn't fight him! At least, not alone! If you're right, we'll need to work together to beat him! Let me and Aqua -"

"In your enervated condition, you'd be nothing more than burdens."

Something about Terra's response whispered against Satsuki's heart.

It ebbed and flowed with every successive beat. A sense of longing entered her consciousness.

Perhaps it was nothing more than nostalgia for a past never to return. But even if that was true, her glower nevertheless softened,

transforming the expression once infamous throughout Honnouji Academy into introspection. Junketsu, both its power and insatiable hunger, bubbled to the forefront of her mind. The Kamui, no matter its origins or temperament, had been at her side until the end. But unlike Ryuko's relationship with Senketsu, they weren't comrades nor friends. Even after Inumata and Iori tempered the Kamui using donated Life Fibers from Senketsu, Junketsu had been nothing more than clothing.

Yet, despite that, she regretted sacrificing Junketsu to save humanity. Perhaps, if things had been different, another method of stopping Ragyo Kiryuin would have surfaced. Which was why, even for exponentially different reasons, she understood, at least somewhat, the *pain* Ryuko felt when Senketsu sacrificed himself.

"But do not confuse honesty with callousness!"

With a metallic *ting*, she aimed the Scissor Blade at the masked individual, ending any chance of further argument from Terra and Aqua, "Collect yourselves! Gather your energy! Until you do so, I shall keep him busy!"

The ridiculous level of confidence irritated Vanitas.

"You..."

Her sense of superiority annoyed him.

"... want to..."

But the overwhelming *arrogance* instilled into his incomplete heart the desire to physically choke the life from her lungs."

"... keep me busy?"

It started as a light flicker. But soon enough, as he *yanked* himself out of the wall, the power of his hatred manifested in the form of a purple-black miasma. Angrily clenching his hands into fists, Vanitas

floated above the ground, darkness enveloping his body. He could have summoned countless Unversed to overwhelm the girl. Using the hatred and frustration created from listening to her annoying prattle, it would have been easy to spawn several powerful Unversed, each more than capable of tearing her apart limb from limb. Simple. Pragmatic. On any other day, he wouldn't have thought twice about the decision.

He doubted the old coot would give damn if one, or both, of the naïve morons bit the bucket.

But that wouldn't get the *point* across.

With nothing but a half-formed thought, the grievous damage regenerated. Darkness merged into what passed as flesh. In mere moments, he was back to normal. Shadows and crackling bursts of light encircled his fingers when Void Gear manifested *louder* than normal. The Keyblade trembled, energy sparking between the cog-like teeth. Electricity, tainted purple and black by darkness, arced down the length of the keychain as his attention, for the final time, settled on the defiant human.

[“That sounds almost *desperate*.”](#)

The near light-speed clashing of the Scissor Blade against his Keyblade *smashed* him through the building. Grunting lightly as he crashed through room after room, eventually leaving out the other side before, much to his surprise, going through *another* building, he sneered behind the opaque mask at the girl's defiance. As furniture, plaster and shards of shattered or broken metal splintered against his back, Vanitas focused on the crimson blade quivering inches from his face. Darkness and light clashed to the point of supernatural absurdity until it exploded into scintillating nothingness that buckled and warped reality.

“Utter foolishness!”

Gritting her teeth when Vanitas reversed their positions upon crashing through another building, forcing her head to briefly scrape against the ceiling, Satsuki ignored the shards of glass stabbing into her back. She seethed, growing more determined with every passing second, as they crashed through the second-floor window, raining not only broken glass, but torrents of darkness and light, upon the streets below.

“DESPERATION BEGETS FAILURE!!!”

The sheer force of her willpower... of the strength dwelling inside her battle-forged heart... threw the masked individual off guard. But not enough. As she kicked off his stomach, giving herself some breathing room, her spine arched backwards, allowing the Keyblade to pass inches above her face. With somber regard, she tracked the weapon's trajectory. She followed the darkness and magic crashing through reality in its wake.

But even so, despite facing the prospect of another grievous injury, a quick survey of the approaching landscape afforded her everything she needed to know.

“AND I AM ANYTHING *BUT* DESPERATE!!!”

She, rather than Vanitas, was the first to land.

Her heeled boots viciously *clacked* as they skidded across the relatively smooth concrete. One side of her mouth twisted into an ugly snarl. Strength poured from her heart, granting life and purpose to her existence. Stepping cross-wise when Vanitas attempted to reciprocate her actions, Satsuki effortlessly shifted her center of balance. It was a difference of barely three inches. An inconsequential change. But enough for her to lash out, hook her free hand under his throat and throw the masked youth across the plaza and *through* the small and decorative fountain bearing dragons and serpents.

[“Heh...”](#)

The sound bubbled from Vanitas's throat as he laid prone on the ground, arms spread and water pooling beneath his body, before vaulting back onto his feet, "Well, you still have your high and mighty attitude."

He stopped laughing when Satsuki leapt through the destroyed fountain. Alongside crackling darkness, Void Gear rematerialized in his clenched fingers, intercepting the Scissor Blade mid-swing. As the crimson blade catching against his Keyblade's teeth ricocheted across the plaza, Vanitas grunted when the ground beneath his feet began cracking. Pavement buckled in thick sheets behind his boots. Yet it wasn't enough to budge him. With sparks flying between their weapons, darkness exploding from Void Gear only to dissipate against the brilliant light manifesting around the teenager's body, he furiously held his ground.

Another several exchanges, each quicker than the blink of an eye, left him with a minor cut on his arm.

Seething at her resilience, he launched himself forward. He pushed against Satsuki's onslaught, turning her offensive into a retreating defensive. The purple-black miasma grew deeper and stronger. He forced her backwards, heeled boots skidding against the ground. It filled the air with the smell of burning rubber. But it was the angry grimace on her face. The frustrated shimmer in her cold eyes. The way her expression screamed 'damn it' over and over again. *Those* things brought sadistic excitement to his darkened heart.

"What did you say before?"

He skipped through the air above the Scissor Blade, dust and smoke trailing from his shoulders, "Something about keeping me busy, right?"

With the flick of his wrist, a salvo of fireballs launched themselves from Void Gear. Against anyone else, that would have functioned as an effective attack. Or, at the very least, enough to buy some time. But against someone like the arrogant bitch? No, it wasn't even

close to being enough. Not when she sliced through them with the Scissor Blade, took a step forward and launched herself after him, anger burning within her cold, blue eyes.

A deep *warble* pierced the tension while purple-black miasma once more engulfed his heart.

Reality turned sideways as he vanished into the emptiness filling the void between worlds. The jaunt pulled him out of harm's way. He was gone less than a second. More than enough time to experience the excitement of the Scissor Blade sliced through thin air.

A split-second lowering of her defenses that he took *full* advantage of.

Smash!

With an exceptionally satisfying *crack*, Void Gear smashed against Satsuki's cheek. On its own, not that powerful. Any half-trained idiot wouldn't be phased in the slightest. But adding darkness into the equation?

It was almost unfair.

He watched the teenager's head snap sideways, blood gushing between her gasping lips. To his immense satisfaction, she spun backwards, barely keeping her balance as she backpedaled across the plaza. And when she raised her head, gasping heavily for air, he laughed. Blood streamed from the gash over her left eye. It oozed from the corner of her mouth, frothed with saliva. Her eyes shone with frustration as she pushed forward the moment he reached the ground, lashing out with a vertical strike aimed at the juncture between his head and shoulders.

"Come on! Is this the best you got?"

Quickly ducking underneath the Scissor Blade, Vanitas felt something close to disappointment as he viciously smashing his

knee into Satsuki's stomach. A powerful attack that sent the teenager flying across the plaza.

"I thought you would be more *fun* than this!"

Clack!

Satsuki felt one boot touch the ground. And then the other. But soon enough, she recovered from the impromptu flight. Pain radiated from her stomach as blood dripped down the front of her coat. But without delaying for something as inconsequential as physical trauma, she cocked her right arm backwards and curled her fingers around the Scissor Blade in a specific fashion, "You talk too much!"

It was laughable.

He saw it coming from a mile away.

Throwing himself into the counterattack, Vanitas swung Void Gear, deflecting the Scissor Blade high into the sky, "Oh really? And what was that -"

In a flash of speed, Satsuki sprinted across the plaza, severing the question before he could finish speaking.

Taking several pages out of her sister's playbook, partially blinded by the blood dripping down her face, she smashed the palm of her hand against the underside of Vanitas's chin. The impact immediately thrust him into the air. It swept him off his feet while her fingers latched around his helmet. One by one her knuckles bled white as the pressure *cracked* the opaque glass visor.

Clack!

With a snarl, she thrust her arm forward and slammed Vanitas head-first into the ground. As his back twisted at an obscene angle, her shoulders lurched, blood dribbling from the corners of her mouth. Something in her chest screamed. But the pain only tightened her

grip. She gnashed her teeth, eyebrows furrowing together. And still holding onto the masked individual's helmet even as cracks spiderwebbed from her fingers... even as his hand reached towards her throat... Satsuki listened to the faint *whish* growing louder by the second.

And as the sound reached its climax, she *grabbed* the descending Scissor Blade and swung at perhaps the only vulnerable part of Vanitas's anatomy.

Her eyes narrowed as, for the second time, she sunk the hardened Life Fiber blade into its target. Or attempted to. Because to her frustration, Vanitas clapped his hands together, catching the crimson blade before it sliced through his neck.

"I may lack the proper means to kill you!"

Satsuki forced herself forward another inch, driving the Scissor Blade closer to its target despite the preposterous strength standing in her way, "But that does not mean you are capable of besting me!"

"Tch!"

Between the effort of holding back the Scissor Blade and listening to her inane prattle, Vanitas found himself uncharacteristically enraged. Every second he was forced, through nothing more than proximity, to hear her nonsensical superiority worsened the negative emotions swirling within his splintered heart. And worse than that, she was mocking him! No way! Not a chance! How dare this bitch think, even for a moment, she was better than him! He wasn't some weakling! He wasn't a pushover like Ventus, too weak and pathetic to stand up against his own darkness! He was stronger than anyone!

Even Ardyn Izunia!

"You... arrogant... bitch..."

His fingers tightened around the Scissor Blade, slowly but surely pushing it away from his face. They clenched around the razor-sharp edge, blood-like darkness dripping from growing gashes in his armor. But it wasn't enough. She was still matching his strength. Snarling viscously at the concept this nobody was in any way, shape or form his equal, darkness exploded from his heart. It erupted forth in a blaze of pitch-black power. A tempestuous shadow that fought tooth and nail against the overwhelming light pouring out of the girl's heart.

But with a hate-filled grunt, he jerked the Scissor Blade sideways. His fingers slipped along the weapon as it sunk into the ground next to his neck, missing by the barest of margins.

"Even if you *had* a Keyblade, you can't kill me! It's impossible!"

In the subsequent gap between moments, he smashed his elbow into her ribs, eliciting a pained grimace.

"So, go ahead! Keep wasting your energy!"

Leaping onto his feet, he reached out, intent on latching his fingers around her face, only for Satsuki to duck out of the way. Darkness-tainted fire wisped around his fingers, exploding above her head as a massive fireball.

"It only makes squeezing the life from your corpse that much easier!"

Time slowed to an agonizing crawl as he floated next to the obnoxious bitch, their bodies shifting in different directions. He looked downwards, staring into her glaring eyes. Matching her hate-filled expression. But twisting midair, lightning crackling around his arms and legs, Void Gear materialized back into his hand. Magic crackled and spun into arcs of electricity as he swung, intent on ending her miserable existence once and for all.

["Heh..."](#)

It was a faint laugh, nothing more than a whisper on the wind. But as she bent backwards, head approaching the ground and blood trailing down the sides of her face, the corners of her mouth quirked upwards. Her eyes were shadowed by her swaying hair. And another chuckle, equally authoritative and commanding, passed between Satsuki's smirking lips.

"... is that right?"

Jingle.

As her breath ran ragged, Aqua gathered every scrap of magic remaining within her heart. She felt exhausted. Her knees wanted to buckle. Running after Satsuki hadn't been easy, not after she fought Vanitas. But even on the cusp of collapsing, she gritted her teeth and steadied herself. Multicolored light first flickered, then exploded, around Rainfell, streaming along the dull metallic Keyblade as it snapped into position. She took another breath, forcing energy into her increasingly unresponsive limbs. And paying close attention, eyes further narrowing with every successive target *pinging* as faint whispers in the back of her mind, she squeezed her fingers and fired.

"Take this!"

The rainbow orbs slammed into his body one after another. They sent him spiraling away from Satsuki, spinning head over heels before crashing to the ground. He skidded against his shoulder before lurching back onto his feet, allowing him to witness, with eyes wide and mouth drawn into a grimace, the remaining magical projectiles spiraling through the air, all of them missing the arrogant bitch.

Explosions blossomed throughout the plaza as he began desperately deflecting the magical onslaught. Multicolored orbs of scintillating magic slammed into the surrounding structures and buildings.

But as the last projectile slammed into his shoulder, sending him stumbling sideways, a descending shadow tore the breath from his nonexistent throat.

“It’s over!”

Looming over Vanitas, ochre light enveloping Earthshaker as he leapt off the building, Terra swung the massive Keyblade with all his might.

And alongside an ear-deafening *crack*, the left side of Vanitas’s helmet shattered, sending shards of glass exploding through the air.

Last edited: Sep 17, 2018

Chapter 7.8

So, a lot of new information about Kingdom Hearts came out. Some stuff I expected. And a lot I didn't. Needless to say, I'm going to proceed as planned, only changing things if it suits my fancy. Although the concept of a doll-like Heartless that puppeteers other toys is interesting. Anyway, I present to you the end of Chapter 7. Enjoy.

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/1/18/EP3-02_Satsuki_Kiryuin.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140510203906]

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“Take this!”

Guided by the powerful light within her heart, the multicolored sphere hovering above Aqua’s Keyblade exploded into dozens of smaller, but no less powerful, orbs. Utterly enraged by the deception, Vanitas decided to cut his losses. Leaving the bitch to her own devices, he instinctively leapt in the opposite direction. His boots scrapped against the ground. Every step taking him further from the naïve Keyblade Master. And completely aware of the conniving, self-righteous smirk spreading across Satsuki’s face, he flipped Void Gear into an intimately familiar reverse grip.

“Nice try!”

Surprise attack or not, deflecting the onslaught was pathetically simple. With each swing of his Keyblade, multiple explosions blossomed throughout the plaza. The scintillating magic the Keyblade Master spent so much time preparing slammed against nearby buildings. None of the projectiles so much as grazed him. But as the final projectile reflected against Void Gear’s teeth, spiraling upwards before destroying a chimney, a descending shadow tore the breath from his nonexistent throat.

“It’s over!”

Vaulting over the edge of the roof, breath ragging and sweat dripping down his face, ochre light enveloped Earthshaker as Terra swung the Keyblade with every scrap of power remaining in his heart.

There was a brief moment of resistance. A second where Terra thought his strength wasn't enough. But with an ear-deafening *crack*, something which echoed across the plaza alongside a powerful explosion of shadowy light, the left side of Vanitas's helmet shattered into thousands of pieces.

To Vanitas, the pain stemming from the blunt edge of a Keyblade slamming against his face didn't compare to the embarrassment of letting the first-grade moron get the drop on him.

As shards of glass rained outwards from the point of impact, blossoming forth through the air without care, he lurched forward. The bones in his neck cracked, almost shattering when the force accompanying the attack sent him staggering to the right. The world temporarily lost focus, colors and sounds blending into a cacophony of darkness and light. Void Gear all but slipped from his fingers. It bounced twice against the ground before vanishing.

Before he could recover, a heeled boot, oh so familiar, swept out his feet. It forced him to the ground, rolling shoulder over shoulder until stopping on his back. And as the summer wind brushed against his exposed face, a crimson blade snapped into position inches from his nose.

[Clack!](#)

That same heeled boot immediately pinned his right arm against the pavement.

"Give up!"

Poised to strike, one twitch from ending Vanitas's monstrous existence, Satsuki gazed upon his true visage. Her glower deepened at the youthful face previously hidden behind opaque glass. Spikey black hair swayed alongside her own bangs in the gentle breeze as her fingers tightened around the Scissor Blade. Ominous golden eyes glared into her own, intense hatred and disdain readily apparent. She could *sense* what he was planning. The thoughts

spinning through his psychotic mind obvious. And through nothing more than increasing the pressure on his wrist, demonstrated *who* had emerged victorious.

“You cannot win!”

Vanitas snarled at the insinuation that she, not him, had the advantage.

But just as quickly, he leaned backwards until his head touched the ground and started laughing.

“Heh... fine. You beat me.”

Laughter bereft of amusement and sanity echoed across the plaza as he watched the naïve idiots finally join the arrogant bitch. Their expressions were priceless. A Keyblade Master and someone desperately trying to control the darkness in his heart couldn’t accomplish what this nobody did. After throwing everything at him, it took the arrival of someone without magic or a Keyblade to turn the tides in their favor. It was breathtakingly pathetic, “Go ahead. Kill me. But you morons better be ready for the consequences.”

Something about Vanitas’s tone set off warning bells in Aqua’s heart, “What are you talking about?”

“The monsters you’ve spent so *much time* fighting. What do you think will happen to them if you kill me?”

Vanitas smirked as the Keyblade Master’s blue eyes widened. An expression matched by the naïve idiot’s utter shock and, not surprising in the slightest, the lack of a response from the only person looking for an excuse to end his existence, “Do you think they’ll just disappear into thin air? That everything will go back to normal once I’m dead? Oh, grow up. Without me controlling them, they’ll run rampant across each and every world!”

The thought of such things *terrified* Aqua.

Truth be told, she hadn't thought about the consequences of killing Vanitas. Ending someone's life... the concept wasn't something she took lightly. At times, perhaps more than she'd believed, striking someone down had seemed the best option to prevent darkness from extinguishing light. In retrospect, her haste had been childish and foolish. And she was immensely thankful for the Fairy Godmother's advice. But Vanitas? She had *no* compunctions about killing him. He was the monster who destroyed Ryuko's world. Who unleashed the Unversed across the Realm of Light, killing who knew how many innocent people.

Allowing him to live, even for another moment, went against everything Master Eraqus taught them.

But if he wasn't lying about the Unversed... if this actually wasn't a bluff... they couldn't afford to kill -

"Your deception falls upon deaf ears!"

It took nothing more than a single synapse for the truth to be laid bare for all to see. Dismissing the admission as nothing more than the falsehood it truly was, Satsuki tightened her grip on the Scissor Blade. And in return, the hardened Life Fiber blade *sang*, "Against the might of the bear, the wolf's strength holds no meaning! That you would even insinuate something with such obvious consequences betrays its fabrication!"

"Boy, aren't you confident..."

As worried as he was by Satsuki's lack of empathy, which was to say not at all, Vanitas smirked despite the blade aimed squarely between his eyes. Slowly dragging his fingers against the ground until they were clenched into a fist, he stared into her callous eyes. He drank in her anger simmering below the surface. And he once more laughed, "But go ahead. Call my bluff. Nothing's stopping you. After all, I'm just the person who destroyed your world, right? Who knows what else I'm capable of doing. So, maybe you're right. Maybe the Unversed won't rampage if you strike me down."

“That just means I’ll *order* them to kill everyone!”

Sadism clung to his heart as he grinned madly at the three morons, insanity and hatred dancing in his amber eyes, “Before you swing that sword, they’ll begin slaughtering every living being in their path! Thousands! Millions! Everyone will die! And it will be all *your* fault!”

“You... bastard...”

Terra seethed at Vanitas’s monstrous promise. Rage bubbled within his heart. And a flicker of darkness, almost impossible to notice, momentarily curled around his fingers as Earthshaker trembled, “If you think we’re going to let you -”

“Impressive acting.”

Years of practice rendered her immune to such bluffs. An entire lifetime of maintaining stoicism against her mother’s analytical mind, knowing the slightest faltering of her breath could render everything ruined, shattered the well-built façade surrounding Vanitas’s deception. Perhaps if the circumstances were different, she would have reconsidered. Instead, she simply increased the pressure on his wrist, “But I’ve stood against monsters *far* worse than you.”

“Heh... heh... heh... figured everything out, did you?”

Between his clenched fingers, flickers of darkness formed into existence. First as thin, wisp-like flames invisible to the naked eye. Then as solidified smoke oozing around his hand. He was careful. Considerate of the naïve moron’s newfound ability to sense darkness. But by the time his laughter obtained their undivided attention, the darkness had grown into a chaotic maelstrom impossible to stop, “That’s a *real* shame...”

“Look out!”

He sensed the darkness, too little and too late.

But even so, Terra rushed forward, grabbed Satsuki's shoulder and threw her backwards. Over her protests, he swung Earthshaker, time slowly to a crawl as the Keyblade and Vanitas's fingers approached one another. The surprised gasp faded into the background as he focused everything, mind, heart and soul, on the darkness surging forth. He braced himself for what was coming. It was the only thing he could do.

And yet, despite doing everything possible, the explosion almost knocked him unconscious.

The overwhelming eruption of darkness didn't so much as slam into his body as it battered against his very existence. Before he could blink, the breath was stolen from his lungs. Both his arms and legs immediately felt like concrete. He could *feel* the terrifying power striking Earthshaker, the physical manifestation of his inner light and strength. Slowly but surely, he felt himself getting pushed back. Digging his feet into the ground didn't help. Propping his other hand against Earthshaker, ignoring the searing darkness burning his fingers, didn't help in the slightest.

It wasn't enough.

This strength wasn't enough to stop Vanitas! It wasn't enough to protect Aqua and Satsuki!

Somewhere, deep in his heart, a flicker of darkness blossomed into existence. His overwhelming desire to protect, even though it was born from selflessness, cultivated that tainted and corruptive power. It gave him newfound strength. A purple-black miasma curled around his hands. If only temporarily, he accepted the darkness.

And in that brief moment, he hardened his resolve and swung Earthshaker, *shattering* Vanitas's attack into nothingness.

"Congratulations."

Planting one hand against the ground before leaping onto his feet, Vanitas chuckled at the misery and despair clinging to their hearts, "You get to live another day."

"And *you*..."

Hatred clung to his voice as a Corridor of Darkness manifested out of nothingness. Even if nothing actually changed... even if this was nothing more than a side trip... he wasn't about to ignore her arrogance. It simply wouldn't do. He'd allow Xehanort his fun. He'd let the old man do whatever he wanted to Terra. Because he honestly couldn't care less about tearing apart existence. But he was going to make her pay. Not just for shits and giggles. He wanted to drive into her annoying heart that *he* was better than *her*, "You got lucky."

Their eyes met, if only for a moment. His fingers clenched into a fist. And the anger, frustration and unending despair defining his existence bubbled to the surface of his heart, "It won't happen again. But don't worry. I'll remember you. Besides..."

He turned around, stepping into the darkness without bothering to so much as look at Terra or Aqua, "... it never hurts to have a backup."

"Tch... damn it!"

Coughing harshly, blood splattering onto the ground, Terra lurched forward once Vanitas vanished, Earthshaker falling from his trembling fingers. Smoke rose from his clothing, burnt and scorched by the searing darkness. With every ragging breath, the pain in his shoulder, caused by the initial explosion, worsened. But the pain was *nothing* compared to the complete sense of failure. Damn it! He promised Master Xehanort he would stop Vanitas. He promised himself he would stop Vanitas for what he did to Ryuko's world. But to come this far only to fail?

It hurt worse than -

“Do not blame yourself.”

With each step forward, passing first Aqua until she was standing at Terra’s side, Satsuki’s heels clacked with rhythmic purpose, “Vanitas planned his escape from the moment he was struck down. But if nothing else, thanks to your assistance, we now know his true appearance.”

“I... thanks...”

He released the breath building in his throat, “Hey, you alright?”

“My health is of no great concern.”

The question, although unbiased and born from selflessness, manifested guilt within her heart. Something Satsuki accepted without reproach. For there was no excuse. Terra’s extensive wounds were her fault, no one else’s. If she’d been more attentive to Vanitas’s movements instead of concerning herself with unnecessary bantering, he wouldn’t have suffered, “Nothing more than cuts and bruises. However, the same cannot be said about your injuries.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

Terra attempted to crack a smile. He really did. Unfortunately, the pain in his shoulder made that nearly impossible, “I’m used to this sort of... ow!”

“You could have died!”

Angrily pulling her hand away from his cheek, Aqua glared at her best friend. She tried *being* frustrated with Terra. She wanted to yell at him for doing something so stupid. But despite how hard she tried, she couldn’t feel anything but relief, “Even for you, that much darkness... I mean... I’m just glad you’re alright.”

“Aqua! Terra!”

As he sprinted into the plaza, Ven nearly tripped on a loose piece of debris.

“Whoa!”

His heel slid across the ground. For an embarrassing brief moment, Ven lurched forward, arms waving wildly as he did everything short of using magic to keep himself from falling flat onto his face. But upon recovering his balance, he let out a relieved sigh. He propped his hands onto his knees and shook his head. Finally! After running around town for what felt like hours, he finally found Terra! If not for the strange explosions, it would have taken even longer. But as he looked at Terra, Aqua and the strange girl with them, relief quickly transformed into worry, “Oh no!”

It didn’t take a genius to realize what must have happened. No way could Unversed do this to Terra and Aqua, “What happened!? Don’t tell me *he* was here!”

“We’re fine, Ven.”

Terra tried putting up a brave front. He ignored the pain in his shoulder. But it was obvious Ven wasn’t buying it. And he honestly couldn’t blame him. After all, he must look like utter crap, “The guy wasn’t exactly a pushover. So, if you don’t mind, give me a second to catch my breath and I’ll tell you everything.”

“Oh man, that’s a relief.”

He didn’t know where to begin. And that was fine! Knowing Aqua and Terra were alright - well, except for some nasty cuts and bruises - was a massive weight off his shoulders. And seeing them acting like nothing happened, like before the Mark of Master when everything changed, brought a smile to his face.

“So, does that mean...”

“Yes, it’s fine now, Ven,” Aqua lightly chuckled, happiness that didn’t quite reach her eyes, “You don’t need to ask.”

“Hmm...”

As much as he wanted to ask questions, Ven found himself staring at the strange girl standing next to Terra. There was something really familiar about her. And it had nothing to do with her long black hair, intimidating expression or thick eyebrows. And he wasn’t particularly relieved by the blood dripping down her face. Or how her expression didn’t falter. No, he was staring at the sword in her hand. Sure, the shape was slightly different from Ryuko’s. But there was no doubt in his heart.

That was a Scissor Blade.

“Hey, you must be Satsuki!”

Extending his hand, Ven’s smile faltered, then faded entirely, when Satsuki didn’t so much as raise her arm, “Uh... was it something I said?”

It was neither rudeness nor a sense of self-inflated arrogance that prevented her from reciprocating the honest gesture. Merely surprise. Out of everything she’d anticipated, she simply hadn’t expected the familiarity in which Ven spoke her name. While several beings across the various worlds were somewhat aware of her identity, due to necessity more than anything nefarious, it was a closely-guarded secret. One she didn’t confess without necessity. Perhaps Ven had spoken with Scrooge at some point. The businessman was one of the only people she respected to any great extent. But the reason did not truly matter.

That he *knew* her name *and* addressed her with such familiarity was grounds for suspicion.

Without so much as an errant breath, she sheathed the Scissor Blade. The razor-sharp surface slid into the specially-crafted

scabbard. And once she was finished, upon lowering her arm and gently tucking several loose strands of hair behind her ear, calmly asked, "How do you know my name?"

"Ryuko told us."

Those three words, delivered by none other than Terra, shattered her otherwise unbreakable resolve.

"What?"

Aqua's smile tightened, turning somewhat sympathetic, "You and Mako are all Ryuko talks about."

"I see..."

Satsuki didn't know how to respond. No, she *knew*. But she simply couldn't muster the resolve to properly express the utmost relief swelling throughout her heart.

For what felt like an eternity, Aqua and Terra's voices repeated inside her mind. Emotions, conflicting and contradictory, manifested. They made themselves known, drawing her heart into someplace it rarely ventured. Her pulse quickened. But with a subtle glower, she took a deep breath. The well-practiced motion cleared her mind, allowing her to think clearly and concisely. To know that Ryuko not only survived the destruction of their world but made several friends along the way, all of whom were more than willing to stand at her side, lessened the phenomenal guilt upon her shoulders.

This was proof, however indirect and roundabout, that other survivors existed. That her friends and acquaintances... Jakuzure, Gamagori, Inumuta, Sanageyama and Hououmaru... might be scattered across the worlds.

But she was *not* blind.

As much as she wished otherwise, instinct and experience wouldn't allow suspicion to perish. Simply through piercing together available information, it was readily apparent both Aqua and Terra knew her identity from the moment she strode into the courtyard. Ven's familiarity with the Scissor Blade fully explained Terra's previous reluctance to allow her to confront Vanitas. As well as Aqua's. They had been worried she'd falter against Vanitas before reuniting with Ryuko. An absurd and ridiculous notion.

Yet one she gratefully accepted.

"You have my gratitude and thanks."

The words slipped between parted lips as she accepted newfound serenity into her heart, "But if it's not too much trouble, do you happen to know where I might find Ryuko?"

"Uh..."

Confusion and *a lot* of worry pounded against Ven's heart. The last time he'd seen Ryuko, she was flying across town on the back of an Unversed. But at the same time, Satsuki's glare was *really* unnerving, "... she's in town. But I don't -"

"Last I saw her, she was heading through the Outer Gardens."

Terra brushed aside Aqua's surprise, not to mention Ven's disbelief, with a half-hearted grin. Yet inside his heart, he was worried. Not about Ryuko, but about himself. If Ryuko hadn't been there, everything would have changed. He would probably still be looking for that thug claiming to have kidnapped Master Xehanort. But the more he thought about someone like that coward overpowering a well-respected Keyblade Master, the more he felt like an idiot. No way could someone like that defeat Master Xehanort. It was impossible. But if the goon hadn't been bluffing. If he'd been telling the truth. Ryuko was strong enough to win.

He knew she was.

But doubt still sowed itself into his heart.

“She’s probably still there.”

If Ryuko was in trouble, resting on his ass was out of the question,
“It’s not that far from here. Ven, Aqua and me can help you -”

“God damn it!”

Ryuko didn’t care how many people she shoved out of the way. She honestly lost track. Even after accidentally headbutting that creepy-looking scientist, the most she did was quickly heal his broken nose. Her eyebrow twitched. Her mouth tightened into an annoyed grimace. And her Keyblade, swinging back and forth with every bounding step, almost glowed in the sunlight. The masked freak was somewhere in town! And like *hell* was she going to let him walk away! Not this time! Not again! All she needed to do was follow the trail of destruction back to the source!

And once she found the asshole, she was gonna bury him six feet underground!

“Shit! Where the hell is that bastard!?”

As she barreled into the plaza, she spun around, Threadcutter just *waiting* to slice Vanitas apart, “I know he’s around here -”

“Ryuko?”

Her heart skipped a beat.

The desire to kick Vanitas’s ass. To do anything. All of it, and more, disappeared. As if they never existed. For a moment, she stood there, unable to believe her ears. A suspicious part of her heart whispered words of caution. That she shouldn’t get her hopes up. But as she turned around, eyes trembling and pulse racing, Threadcutter almost fell from her fingers.

“S-Satsuki?”

This *wasn't* a dream.

Threadcutter dissipated into motes of crimson light as she threw her arms around Satsuki, thrown to the wayside in exchange for something far more important. Hugging her sister even tighter, as if Satsuki would disappear if she let go, Ryuko blinked away the tears swelling in her eyes, "How are you here?"

"You called to me."

Satsuki rested her chin against Ryuko's shoulder, smiling faintly for nobody to see, "And I followed that connection back to you."

"Damn it!"

Now that her sis was here, Ryuko didn't know what to say. It was surreal. Almost like a dream. She wanted to shout at Satsuki. She wanted to deck her sister in the face. There were far too many things in her heart. Far too many for anyone to possibly count. But more important than anything else, she didn't want to let go, "I've been looking everywhere for you!"

"Humph..."

An amused chuckled whistled between Satsuki's smirking lips, "Do you intend to keep hugging me all day, Ryuko?"

"Oh... uh..."

Hesitantly releasing her sister, but not enough to look like she wanted to let go, Ryuko glowered at Satsuki's choice of clothing. If there was one thing her sis knew better than just about everyone, it was fashion and accessorizing. Something *both* of them got from Ragyo Kiryuin, for better or worse. But that wasn't while her eyebrow twitched. Sure, Satsuki's new duds practically screamed 'I'm better than you' almost as loudly as Junketsu. But one look at Satsuki, and then at Terra and Ven, snapped everything into place.

She *finally* understood why Satsuki looked like she took another beating from dear old mom.

“Hold on!”

In the blink of an eye, anger reasserted itself, “Don’t tell me *you* fought that masked freak!”

“As if *you* had priority over his punishment.”

The arrogance pervading her sister’s possessive tone was mildly insulting. That Ryuko would believe, even for a moment, she would stand down and allow Vanitas to escape punishment was ludicrous. She almost sneered. Yet despite the argument brewing against the edges of her heart, Satsuki cracked an amused smirk. A pleasantry which disappeared upon a *clack* of her heeled boots.

Clack!

“Carve this lesson into your heart, Ryuko!”

An expression, one intimately familiar yet long-disused, accompanied the holy backdrop of light silhouetting her gently swaying hair, “As the coyote howls to the buzzard, one cannot achieve greatness through procrastination!”

“Tch! You *really* gonna start spewing that annoying crap?”

Ryuko spat onto the ground when Satsuki’s perpetual frown deepened, anger that didn’t quite reach her eyes, “Look! I had important shit to do, alright! And because I *know* what you’re gonna ask, let’s make something clear! I could have kicked that freak’s ass without your help!”

“Oh? Is that so?”

A single, thick eyebrow quirked at the declaration, “You speak boldly, Ryuko. However, unless Vanitas decides to return under his own volition, such statements are nothing more than theory!”

“Huh...”

Ven felt himself drifting into a strange state of confusion. One moment Ryuko and Satsuki were hugging, and things seemed fine. The next, they were shouting at each other. And now this? It didn't make any sense. Scratching the back of his head, he glanced back and forth, first to Terra and then Aqua, before stating the first thought that came to mind, “I guess they really *are* sisters.”

Chapter 8.1

So, here you go. The first part of Chapter 8. By the way, does anyone know how long Birth By Sleep took from start to finish? I want to say about a month between the Mark of Mastery and Terra becoming Xehanort's vessel.

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 8 - Star Overhead

“Ugh...”

He *hated* getting sand inside his greaves. But the blasted stuff was everywhere! Why did this dark and forsaken realm have so much sand? Slouching forward as the path curved around a rather strange-looking piece of architecture, Gilgamesh lazily stabbed a Neoshadow through the face, skewering the unfortunate Heartless upon Lightbringer's blade, before trudging forward.

By the light, he hated the Realm of Darkness. Not only was it dark, nasty and creepy, the place liked to play tricks with his mind. There was always the ominous feeling somebody was watching him. Voices whispered in the depths of his heart. And more often than not, always in the distance or around the corner, an annoying voice laughed at him. It's why he usually didn't stick around for more than a few seconds. Maybe a minute if he wanted to take a break. Fighting epic battles against worthy opponents? Fine! He'll gladly rush into battle every day of the week!

Psychological warfare, on the other hand, was simply cheating.

But it wasn't like he was *trapped* in the Realm of Darkness for eternity or anything. There was not a chance in hell he was going to be stuck in this miserable realm for ten years, alone with nothing but his thoughts, regrets and nightmares slowly driving him into a

spiraling pit of despair. For starters, he could leave any time he wanted! And second, much like the fancy suits of armor worn by keyslinger, the legendary and powerful Genji Armor protected his Heart from the encroaching darkness.

No, the *only* - and he meant singular, sole, one - reason he wasn't waltzing out of the Realm of Darkness into brighter, happier and less dreary pastures was because that blasted woman was waiting for him.

"Grr, confound that sorceress!"

Unable to muster the energy to curse out the magician, Gilgamesh slouched. Geez, that woman didn't know the meaning of holding back. His stomach still ached from that point-blank Thundaga. His fingers and toes twitched every now and then. And he wasn't quite sure, but everything smelled like copper. But, of course, that simply meant he was better than her! He was the great Gilgamesh! Any *normal* mage wouldn't have so much as scratched his Genji Armor, let alone leave a faint smudge!

That a Keyblade Master slash sorceress had to bring out all the stops to momentarily knock the wind from his endless sails *and* send him flying out of a castle several hundred feet above the ground was proof enough that he was the best!

"Humph!"

Mumbling incoherently while a shiver raced down his spine, courtesy of remembering the sorceress's horrific crimson eyes, he trudged forward, sand shifting underneath his feet, "She might have interfered with my grand escape, but I still obtained what I have long sought! A blade of legend! A weapon so powerful that its original wielder deemed it too dangerous for mortal hands!"

Galatyn.

A solid nine point three out of ten.

Even in the purple twilight pervading the Realm of Darkness, the legendary greatsword practically shimmered with enchanting light. A crystal blue blade that tapered from light sapphire near the crossguard to cerulean at the very tip. Wrought golden hilt twisting like a thorn-less rose. It truly was magnificent! Worthy of being wielded by one of the finest swordsmen in the entire Realm of Light! Now, all he needed was one more weapon and he'd be right back to where he started *before* Rusty confiscated his entire collection. The nerve of that arrogant man! After he helped save Lindblum from an evil villain, risking life and multiple limbs in the process, that was the thanks he got?

“Bah! Who cares about that wannabe knight!”

His voice echoed the same way everything did in the Realm of Darkness. It bounced off the darkness. It curled around rocks and craggy spires before returning twice as loud. Throwing one set of hands into the air, Gilgamesh mentally noted his exasperation before discarding it. He had no time for such trivial emotions! Not when there were far more important, not to mention life-threatening, issues to worry about, “Hmm, I wonder if she's given up...”

“Maybe I should wait a little longer? I dunno...”

Despite his best efforts to visualize a solution to the major problem plaguing his existence, Gilgamesh found himself drawing a blank. Darn it! There simply weren't any good answers to his problem! But if he didn't think of something, and did it soon, the moment he stepped back into the Realm of Light, that terrifying Keyblade Master would pop out of nowhere to finish what she started.

He could understand a good chase. But teleportation? That just wasn't fair!

“Hmm?”

A hazy silhouette in the distance caught his attention.

It seemed his self-reflection and introspection had brought him to the Dark Margin. And contrary to expectations, not to mention the rest of the Realm of Darkness, this particular place was akin to an eerily quiet beach. Standing on the edge of the lapping water, sand crunching underneath his boots, Gilgamesh leaned forward. Usually... well, all of the time... there was nobody else around. Aside from those foul creatures constantly annoying him every step of the way. But this time, he wasn't alone. Standing on the water's surface some distance across the vast, probably infinite, ocean, their form silhouetted beneath the hazy, indistinct moon, was another person.

"Gotta hide..."

With a defiant leap, throwing everything into his thighs and calves, Gilgamesh ducked behind the nearest rock, a particularly misshapen outcropping inches from the tide. It was almost impossible - nay, nearly impossible - to hide his massive and well-toned physique. But yet, after a moment to accommodate himself, he succeeded. Darn it! Drat! Of all the monstrous villains to pop out of nowhere like oglops, it had to be Ardyn Lucis Caelum! Breathing deeply, he waited patiently for the evil being to make his presence known through some manner of insulting banter or comments. But when that *didn't* happen, and the tense silence began encroaching on his heart, Gilgamesh carefully peeked around the side of the rock, two sets of hands holding onto the jagged edge and the other two grasping Lightbringer and Galatyn.

"Wait a second..."

Whoever they were, this person *wasn't* Ardyn Lucis Caelum.

It was too far away to see the man... or woman... or possibly woman dressed as a man. But he could tell they were standing on the water's surface, as if it were ice. And now that he was paying attention, and certainly not panicking, he was certain - no, absolutely positive - they were holding a Keyblade. Even at such an amazing distance, his well-trained eyes wouldn't mistake such an interesting,

yet irritatingly picky, weapon for anything else. He was a connoisseur of swords! Nothing escaped his grasp!

Well, except for the Scissor Blade.

But he was certain nothing short of the Realm of Light falling into darkness would make Ryuko give up her amazing sword.

“Darn it, they’re too far away...”

Out across the tranquil tides, far beyond the sea stacks and arches, Gilgamesh watched the figure raise their Keyblade overhead. A grumble built in the back of his throat when darkness coalesced above the fabled weapon, appearing as a purple-black pinpoint of shadowy light glittering against the full moon. And his eyes widened, almost comically, when the mysterious Keyblade wielder thrust the weapon against the ocean’s surface. The built-up darkness ripped outwards, spreading across the stilled waters. And just before reaching the shore, promptly dissipated into wisps of dark smoke and lingering traces of nastiness.

“What are they doing?”

Gilgamesh was beginning to feel something similar to nervousness. But curiosity overwhelmed self-preservation. And so, he scooched further until he was almost leaning over the side of the strange rock, “A ritual of some sort? Is this what Keyblade wielders do during their spare -”

The ground *shook*.

He looked downwards as the sand trembled, sinking into the depressions formed by his greaves, “Huh?”

It shook *again*.

Followed by an ear-deafening roar that stabbed into some primordial part of his heart long since forgotten. Sweat dripped from his chin.

Against his wishes, the twin legendary weapons trembled. But not from nervousness! No, they were shaking because of the constant earthquakes coming like clockwork! There was something incredibly massive swimming underneath the surface. Something growing larger by the second. A shadow that, if he was being truthful, was *much* bigger than anything he'd ever seen.

“Oh boy...”

The air left his lungs when another wave of darkness, much stronger than the first, slammed against the shore. The monstrous power caused him to tumble away from the roiling, chaotic ocean. His head bonked against the ground multiple times before he came to a merciful stop, face planted firmly into the sandy dunes. And as he slowly picked himself up, sand spilling from between his lips, another monstrous roar quaked against his heart.

Followed by the indistinct moon *disappearing* behind darkness.

But it was his heart, the source of his instinct, reflexes and intuition which served him well so far, which whispered images of something incredibly old and dangerously powerful.

“Okay! Time to leave!”

No matter what anyone thought, and he was damn sure nobody was around, this was nothing more than a strategic retreat. He wasn't a Keyblade Master! Defeating ancient creatures of darkness wasn't part of *his* job description. And whatever that mysterious, insane Keyblade wielder was summoning had to be one hell of a monster. Far larger and more powerful than the other creatures. But before he left the Realm of Darkness, all but ready to create a gateway back to sanity, Gilgamesh had the strangest inclination to look over his shoulder. Curiosity viciously gnawed at his heart.

So, with some reluctance, he turned around.

And his jaw promptly dropped at the creature pulling itself out of the ocean.

Clawed-tipped fingers, thin and nimble, reached into the darkened skies before grasping onto the water's surface. Bright green skin traced with paths of writhing darkness covered every inch of the massive body as it *screamed*, shaking the very fabric of reality. And despite knowing it couldn't possibly see him, Gilgamesh involuntarily stepped backwards when the pair of glowing yellow eyes, each twice the size of his physique, snapped in his direction, allowing him to notice the heart-shaped hole in the middle of the creature's forehead.

"Nope!"

Without giving a rat's tail about where he would end up... or if the sorceress was waiting for him... Gilgamesh leapt through the waiting portal, which snapped shut behind him.

That thing was *not* his problem!

Chapter 8.2

Well, this is, I believe, the first time Ryuko had the chance to talk about Honnouji Academy with someone. She's notoriously tight-lipped about her world. Beatrix and Yen Sid know very little. In fact, she trusts them the most, which is why the most she's admitted is that she and Satsuki had 'family issues' a few months before everything went south.

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/e/e6/ED1_Gnjl1.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140717081351]

“... then I found you. That’s about it, I guess.”

As she listened to Ryuko’s confession, Satsuki raised the cup of tea to her lips.

The liquid was bitter yet possessed a rich flavor. The texture, although commercial, was worth every Gil. Yet it nevertheless lacked the quality of Soroi’s particular brew. Sipping gently once, tilting her head back slightly, Satsuki found herself momentarily drawn into her thoughts. In the grand scheme of things, she cared little about the tea. Given the chance, she would forego everything if such a decision meant reunification with the man she considered more of a parent than Ragyo Kiryuin had ever been. His safety and well-being mattered equally to Ryuko’s. Not a moment passed where she didn’t wonder, always with the same intensity, whether Soroi survived their world’s consumption by darkness.

Such worries constantly plagued her heart.

But for the time being, she listened to Ryuko’s story. She hung onto every word. Listened with unwavering attention as her sister discussed, exaggerated and purposely changed details about her experiences throughout the Realm of Light. And once Ryuko

finished, having punctuated her final words with an exhausted groan, she calmly lowered the cup of tea, thoughts already growing hardened.

"It would appear you've had quite the interesting journey."

"That's all ya gotta say?"

From her own spot on the bench, hands folded inside her bloodied jacket, Ryuko grumbled, "I almost died! Twice!"

"You're overreacting."

Ryuko's eyebrow twitched as she resisted the well-deserved urge to glare at her sister, "I am not!"

"If you say so."

It wasn't necessarily the most productive decision, all things considered, yet Satsuki allowed the matter to rest. There were still many questions remaining in her heart. While she would have normally chastised Ryuko's penchant for overreacting, things had changed. And in quite the significant manner. The Realm of Light was different from their world. The rules that dictated reality torn asunder. Perhaps *she*, not Ryuko, wasn't reacting appropriately to the situation. And if so, continuing the conversation would be foolish, "However, we must remain cautious of Ardyn Izunia. Vanitas might remain the most immediate threat, but his strength cannot be ignored."

"You want to fight him?"

"Of course not," taking another sip, Satsuki allowed the tea to linger upon her tongue before continuing, "But knowing one's enemy is necessary. And an enemy as dangerous as Ardyn Izunia cannot be ignored, no matter how much we might wish otherwise."

"Tch! Don't remind me!"

Ryuko clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, “I already know the bastard’s strong!”

There was a moment’s pause as Satsuki once more raised the cup to her lips, “Stronger than Ragyo?”

“Maybe. I mean, yeah? I mean, they’re completely different assholes!”

She rolled her eyes, but not in a good way. Everything about the question was annoying. And admitting anything about dear old mom was like tearing off her own arm. But whether she liked it or not, and she *really* didn’t, even without wearing a Kamui, Ragyo had been tough as nails, “Mom was strong. Batshit crazy, but strong. But this bastard’s no joke! He’s scary as hell. His darkness makes Vanitas look like a freaking punk! If Yen Sid hadn’t stopped him, I’m not sure I’d be sitting here talking to you.”

Her heart clenched at the horrible memory of *feeling* Ardyn Izunia’s unrestrained darkness, “But more important than that, he’s immortal! How the hell do you kill someone who can’t die?”

“There’s always a way, Ryuko.”

Satsuki frowned when the sun briefly vanished behind the eclectic architecture of Hollow Bastion, “Unless you’ve forgotten, Nui Harime touted her superiority multiple times. Yet first our father, then yourself, demonstrated the inaccuracy of her self-proclaimed invincibility.”

“But *this* psychopath ain’t made from Life Fibers!”

The complaint hung in the air before Ryuko collapsed against the bench, “So slicing him with the Scissor Blades won’t cut it. Ugh! Why can’t everything be simple? While he’s doing who-knows-what, spyin’ on me like a freaking pervert, I gotta wait until Yen Sid figures out how to imprison the bastard?”

She angrily punched the bench, leaving a small dent in the fresh metal, "That ain't fair!"

As the wrought iron fixture trembled underneath her sister's frustration, Satsuki stared upwards. There was nothing she could possibly say. The anger clinging to Ryuko's heart was all but palpable. But there was no question, neither in her heart nor mind, their reunion had alleviated some of those concerns. She could already sense the difference. Her sister's irritation was already less visceral. Thus, she allowed her sister to continue expressing herself to the fullest. For she knew better than anyone, with the singular exception of Mankanshoku, Ryuko wore her emotions upon her sleeves.

Yet not once did her attention wander from the topic at hand.

"Ryuko."

Huffing as, for the first time in forever, she finally got everything she wanted to say off her chest, Ryuko looked at Satsuki, the adrenaline rush rapidly fading, "Yeah?"

"Your Keyblade," Satsuki chose her words carefully, "Can I see it?"

"Uh, sure."

Ryuko didn't know where Satsuki was going. But it wasn't like it mattered. With a carefree shrug, she raised her arm, fingers grasping at the air. At the same time, something impossible to describe unless someone *knew* what she was talking about, she searched for the familiar warmth. The light inside her heart. She pulled at that power, causing ruby light to spiral down her arm. And alongside an explosion of crimson stars, Threadcutter appeared in her clenched fingers, which she immediately flipped into a reverse grip.

"Just don't scratch it or anything."

For a brief moment, Satsuki considered accepting her sister's offer.

But she couldn't.

Not now. Not ever.

Not even if Ryuko expressively gave her permission to wield Threadcutter as if it were her own Keyblade.

She recognized too much to *dare* hold the Keyblade. While the keychain dangling from the hilt, a stylized insignia identical to the four-pointed stars Iori and the Sewing Club wore into Goku Uniforms, elicited intense nostalgia, that was the least of her concerns. For it was the Keyblade's similarities to someone *far* more important than mere clothing which established melancholy within her heart.

"Threadcutter..."

The appropriate words seemed ephemeral, impossible to grasp no matter how hard she tried, "Is it..."

["No, it's nothing like Senketsu."](#)

Looking away from her sister, Ryuko tried putting up a brave face. But it wasn't enough. Not even close. Propping the weapon upon her lap, she bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to draw blood, "Threadcutter's part of my heart. It's part of me. Maybe this doesn't make sense, but what I'm tryin' to say is... Threadcutter isn't like the Scissor Blade. It's not really a sword. It's basically *me*."

She knew Satsuki hadn't meant anything by the question, which is why she wasn't angry. Maybe a little annoyed. But not nearly enough to say anything. Because as much as she wanted to ignore it, Satsuki was only pointing out what she'd realized a long time ago. And yet hearing the question, even partially, forced her to remember Senketsu. In the time between beats of her own heart, she relived his final moments. Saw his pain and suffering, "But Senketsu was

Senketsu. It's not *fair* comparing them. It just makes him feel... I dunno... less. Yet this damn thing..."

Threadcutter trembled as her fingers briefly quivered, frustration and despair mixing into something different, "Damn it! Why the hell does it have to look like him?"

"The heart is a mysterious thing, Ryuko. People have dedicated their lives to understanding its intricacies only to achieve nothing."

With calmness unbefitting the situation, Satsuki placed the cup of tea onto the bench between them. Her appetite was long gone. And to continue behaving otherwise would be the peak of arrogance. Yet despite carefully choosing her words, impotent shame poured into her heart. Nothing she could possibly say, no matter how sincere or truthful, would alleviate Ryuko's pain. Her sister's relationship with Senketsu defined definition. It went beyond mere friendship. For if Ryuko and Senketsu had been nothing more than friends, her sister wouldn't still mourn his passing.

And more importantly, if they had been merely friends, Ryuko wouldn't continue blaming herself for Senketsu's death.

"But as you've told me yourself, the Keyblade is forged from one's own heart."

She glanced towards Ryuko, gaze further softening at the pain in her sister's eyes, "Is it possible that your feelings for Senketsu... your memories, pleasant and disagreeable... influenced your Keyblade's appearance?"

"Maybe..."

In a flash of crimson light, Ryuko allowed the Keyblade to disappear, "... it's just, I dunno, maybe my heart could have taken a hint or something. Anything *e/se* would have been fine!"

"Ryuko."

The familiar tone in Satsuki's voice shattered the depression hanging over her heart, "Ugh, what now?"

Not bothered in the slightest by her sister's unabashed snappiness, which could be excused given the circumstances, Satsuki mulled over her next choice of words, "When do you intend to begin searching for Mankanshoku?"

"I never *stopped* looking for Mako!"

More irritated than actually frustrated by Satsuki's question, because it was a damn good one no matter how much she tried denying it, Ryuko huffed, blowing away the bang of crimson hair dangling in front of her eyes, "But yeah, finding Mako's next on my list. What about you?"

"Gamagori and the others have priority."

Satsuki brushed an errant bang of hair behind her ear. Even after more than a month, everyone's voices resonated with perfect clarity in her heart. But closing her eyes, she breathed the crisp, summer evening, allowing the calming weather to clear her thoughts, "As do Soro and Hououmaru. It'll be a long and arduous quest. However, if what you said is true, Yen Sid and the other Keyblade Masters offering their services should significantly narrow down my own search."

"Eh... I guess I'll help you."

Propping her arms against the back of the bench, Ryuko purposely tried sounding as annoying as possible, "Sure, you have crappy friends. Jakuzure's a complete bitch. And Gamagori gets jealous whenever I brag about spending more time with Mako than he does. But like hell does any of that matter. Because they're still your friends. Which is good enough for me!"

There was a brief moment, something Ryuko almost missed, where her sister almost smiled. Which *wasn't* the expression she'd

expected. Crap. Being on her own for so long must have really screwed Satsuki. Rolling her eyes as she considered saying something terrible, just to piss off her sister, she glanced downwards and promptly lost whatever trace of a good mood was left, "But before we do anything, I gotta go head back to Alexandria. Having my clothes fixed ain't gonna be cheap. And after giving everything away to Aerith, I don't have enough to even buy food."

"If money's an issue, I can surely provide -"

"Nah, actually, it's good that I need to go back," cutting off her sister mid-sentence, Ryuko folded her arms before huffing, "Yeah, I know what you're gonna say. It's selfish to consider asking. But I *know* Queen Garnet won't mind you staying in the castle for a few weeks."

An eyebrow quirked, "Are you certain she won't mind?"

"You kiddin? She's almost as nice as Mako!"

Satsuki suppressed the faint smirk pulling upon her lips, "What about Steiner?"

The question caused Ryuko to briefly lose track of what she was going to say. Frowning as she thought back to her lessons in the castle library, something Beatrix had insisted from day one, she clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. And in the same breath, shrugged away Satsuki's concerns, "The guy's a serious stick in the mud. Tch! Last time I tried telling him a joke, he chewed me out! But he ain't that bad. When things get tough, you can count on him to do the right thing. As long as we don't lie to his face, he'll be more than happy to hear things out."

Steel-blue eyes imperceptibly widened as a single chuckle escaped Satsuki's heart, "You've matured, Ryuko."

"What's that supposed to mean!?"

Satsuki didn't stop smiling, not even when Ryuko's expression soured, "Nothing. Forget I said anything."

"Ugh! It's always the same with you, isn't it?"

They might have buried the hatchet alongside dear old mom's insane plan to cover their entire world with Life Fibers, but some things never changed. Including Satsuki's annoying and frustrating ability to always get underneath her skin. But this time, she was gonna let it slide. She was just that generous. Because having her sister back trumped everything else. Being able to sit next to Satsuki... to talk with her sister about everything... made every comment, insult and criticism absolutely pointless. Not to mention she knew when Satsuki was pulling her punches. Or when Satsuki was being genuinely nice but only *sounded* like caterpillar-eyebrowed bitch to get a kick out of her reaction.

And this was definitely the latter.

"Anyway, before we do anything, there's something important I gotta take care of."

The abruptness of her sister's announcement came as a surprise, "What?"

"Before she left, Aqua mentioned running into Merlin."

Kicking her feet forward, Ryuko physically leapt off the bench, landing alongside a solid *thump* without so much as breaking a sweat. She remembered everything. From their goodbyes to making Terra, Aqua and Ven promise to kick Vanitas's psychopathic ass twice. Once for themselves. And once for her. Because it didn't matter *who* beat the shit out of him. As long as somebody made the bastard pay, she'd be happy. But imagining Vanitas crumpled on the ground wasn't what she'd been thinking about for the last couple of hours. She wasn't that stupid. Not by a long shot. There was something *far* more important she needed to do. Something that hopefully didn't involve kicking someone's ass.

“And Terra gave me directions to his house.”

As the Scissor Blade shifted on her back, she yawned, “Which means I gotta stop by and tell him about Jecht.”

“Will it take long?”

“Dunno...”

Ryuko gave her best attempt at a shrug. Because she wasn't lying about not having a freaking clue. She really *didn't* know how long talking with Merlin would take. As much as Mickey and Yen Sid hyped the wizard up, she never actually met Merlin, “He might not even be home. So, just in case I'm wasting my time, I want ya to head to Alexandria without me. Talk to the bartender at the Morning Star Pub. She owes me a major favor. Tell her I sent you and she'll let you stay in a room for one night. Free of charge.”

Her sister's stream of consciousness wasn't surprising. Not in the slightest. That Ryuko somehow managed to have a random bartender owe her a 'favor' was perhaps one of the likeliest things in existence, “Very well. But be careful, Ryuko.”

“Heh, you don't need to worry about me!”

Ryuko knew why her sister suddenly pulled a one-eighty. Anyone with half a working brain could fit two and two together. Especially about something so important. But that just made everything *worse*. She really didn't want to leave. But she promised Jecht to tell his family. And having Merlin *bring* the guy home instead of passing along a message was a thousand times better than her original plan, “You said it yourself. Our Hearts are connected.”

Turning around, she buried her worries and concerns behind a wide smirk, “Even if I got lost, nothing's gonna keep us apart from now on!”

Unknown Report 8

Unknown Report 8

He stepped closer, careful not to make any sudden movements. The slightest fault, a single misstep, and everything would be jeopardized. Their entire plan would go up in smoke before it began. Pressed against the side of the building, fingers dragging along the uneven surface, he swallowed the lump in his throat. At any moment, perhaps right away, their target would realize they were being followed. It was an immense risk. Perhaps too great of a risk for an operative of his experience. But even so, he slowly leaned around the corner, one eye peering across the town square. As anticipated, the mark was standing in front of a particular home.

Better yet, they appeared unaware of his -

In a stroke of exceptionally bad luck, his fingers touched a piece of loose stone, nothing larger than a pebble, sending it crashing to the ground.

The unexpected noise tore the breath from his lungs. Years of training were forgotten as every muscle in his body stiffened. His eyes widened, traces of fear in his heart, when the mark pivoted on the spot, drawn towards the sound.

Yet to his fortune, someone grabbed his shoulder and yanked him backwards just in the nick of time.

“Idiot.”

Clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth as Lea stumbled, then lost his balance entirely, Isa grumbled, “Were you trying to get caught?”

“Sorry, my bad.”

As he banged his shoulder against the ground, thanks in no way to his friend's refusal to hold back, Lea winced. He must've scraped his hands. His palms hurt. And he was pretty sure there was going to be a bruise... or two... in the morning. But a few scrapes and bruises were better than getting caught like an amateur, "Just didn't expect her to turn around like that."

"Why are we even following her?"

Isa didn't bother listening to the half-hearted apology. What was the point? He'd heard it all before. Several times. If he said anything, or didn't say anything, Lea was just going to pull the same stunt tomorrow. Which meant eventually, their luck was going to run out. And one, or both of them, would get into serious trouble. Shaking his head when his friend continued grinning, Lea decided to play along. With a tired sigh, he crouched against the building. And just out of sight from their 'target,' he noticed the way they were holding themselves, plus the strange armor covering most of their left arm.

And he sighed again.

"Oh, I see. You found yourself a girlfriend, didn't you?"

Lea's smirk vanished.

"What?"

"It's fine. I get it. You were shy about introducing her," waving off his friend's indignation, Isa nonchalantly shrugged, "So, when do you intend on actually talking to her?"

"She's not my girlfriend, alright!?"

Lea growled at Isa only to immediately forget everything when the girl knocked on the house's front door. Loudly. Twice. Quickly leaning around the corner, one hand propped against Isa's shoulder and the other on the building, he watched an old man with bushy eyebrows and mustache, white beard nearly reaching his knees, and a blue

cloak answer the door. Which was enough to make him grin. While they were too far away to hear anything, from the way she motioned with her hands, plus how the geezer stroked his beard before ushering her into his home, they had to know each other.

And once the door closed behind the girl, who looked around one final time before walking inside, he elbowed Isa in the ribs, "Told you she was up to something! Now apologize!"

"Yeah, I'm sorry..."

"That wasn't hard, now was -"

"... that you're stalking a random girl who -"

"Ryuko."

There was an awkward silence as he tapped a finger against his temple, "Her name's Ryuko. Trust me. I got it memorized."

"Fine. *Ryuko* knows this guy."

Isa didn't know why he continued putting up with Lea's insistence on memorization. Sure, he understood his friend's dream to have everyone remember his name. But there were limits to his patience, "What's so important about him?"

"Simple."

Quickly glancing back and forth, just in case someone was eavesdropping, Lea leaned forward, one hand cupped around his mouth, "Ventus was talkin' with this guy earlier. His name's Merlin. And he knows how to awaken someone's inner power. So, we're gonna wait until Ryuko leaves. And once she's gone *I'm* gonna march through the front door and awaken my own power!"

"... really?"

Isa rolled his eyes, "Don't tell me you're still sore about losing."

“It was a draw!”

A beat passed as Lea paused, grumbled at Isa’s half-smirk and quickly added, “After seeing how down and out Ventus was, I had to do something to cheer the guy up. Besides, holding back ain’t exactly the easiest thing in the world, ya know.”

“Whatever you say...”

“Hey, lighten up, would ya?”

Lea didn’t know what happened to his friend, the same guy planning their adventure through Hollow Bastion down to the last detail. But this wasn’t Isa. Not a chance, “What happened to your sense of adventure? Just imagine it! You and me, side by side, fighting crime!

Chuckling almost a bit too loudly, he threw his arm around Isa’s shoulders and grinned, “Of course, someone’s gotta be in charge. So, I’m thinkin’ I’ll be the famous hero, which means you’ll be my sidekick.

“Sidekick?”

For the first time since getting dragged across town, Isa responded with something a little more forceful than subdued irritation, “You mean ‘famous loser,’ right? If anything, *I’m* more qualified to be -”

A flash of magical light exploded between the cracks in Merlin’s house, stopping Isa dead in his tracks.

But Lea’s reaction was faster.

Before his friend so much as turned around, he was already sprinting into the town square. This was his chance! Sure, something could go horribly wrong but that was the risk everyone took. In a single jump, he leapt up the stairs to Merlin’s house, slightly out of breath. Resting for a moment, hesitation causing him to briefly rethink

whether or not to go through with it, he reached towards the door only to come across a major, unforeseen problem.

“What the -”

Giving the handle another tug... then two more... Lea blinked in confusion. It didn't make sense. Running a finger down the door, his mind ground to a halt. This wasn't so much a door as something that *looked* like a door. The thing even had a handle and hinges. But it was literally painted onto the house. Moving to the window, he peeked between the wooden blinds only to realize something strange was going on. He couldn't see anything but darkness. Literal, pitch-black darkness. Like someone painted on the inside of the window, “Huh, Merlin must really have a thing for privacy.”

“You about done?”

Standing at a safe distance from the weird house, Isa tried not looking at the ‘hat’ propped on top of the steeped roof. Everything about the place was just a bit too strange for him, “It's getting late.”

“Yeah, yeah...”

Lea groaned from the bottom of his throat as he turned his back on the mysteriously empty house, “But we're coming back first thing tomorrow, got it?”

Chapter 8.3

There's not much I can say about this other than coming up with a name for a character that wasn't originally given a name is difficult.

[img:

https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/finalfantasy/images/6/6c/DFF2015_Jecht_Presentation_Screenshot.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/640?cb=20171013085541]

“Ugh...”

As the blinding light faded... as the sensation of something squeezing his body into the size of a walnut vanished... Jecht staggered forward, immediately collapsing onto his hands and knees. The pain was unbearable. It felt like someone punched him in the stomach. He could feel his lunch forcing its way up his throat. *And* his breakfast. Everything was spinning. Not to mention the splitting headache making it impossible to open his eyes, “Oh man... think I’m gonna hurl...”

“The ‘invincible sir Jecht’ brought down by teleportation sickness?”

Auron chuckled while callously stepping around his fallen friend, “Now I’ve seen everything.”

“Screw... you...”

Unable to open his eyes, not unless he wanted to vomit, Jecht pounded his fist against the sand, “Just give me... a minute and... you’ll be sorry.”

“Oh my!”

Merlin couldn’t believe he missed something so dreadfully important! He’d been so preoccupied removing the piles of sand from his slippers that he hadn’t considered someone might be physically

averse to teleportation. It truly was awful. And he should know. Or maybe, not *him*. At first, Lulu disliked teleportation. And Yen Sid threw up the first dozen or so times before acclimating himself. But from the way Jecht had been raring to leave Olympus Coliseum without so much as a goodbye, teleporting halfway across the universe, body and heart squeezing through the cracks in reality, he thought the man would be perfectly fine.

“Do forgive me. But... oh... these things happen every now and then!”

Reaching into his right sleeve, then his left, he grasped the wooden wand tucked away for safe keeping. After a quick adjustment of his cap, Merlin cleared his throat, pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, and waved the otherwise ordinary piece of wood through the air, turquoise magic streaming in its wake, “And... there! That should do it! Feeling better now?”

“... huh?”

It happened so quickly that, for a moment, Jecht wondered if he’d ever *been* sick.

“Oh right, magic.”

For a moment, he felt like a moron. Who could have possibly known an all-powerful wizard knew healing magic? If the geezer could wave his wand, say a few strange words and *poof* him back home, the guy knew how to cure motion sickness. But as he vaulted onto his feet, backflipping along the way, Jecht stared at the familiar landscape and began laughing, mouth stretching from ear to ear.

“HELL YEAH!!!”

Spreading his arms, he couldn’t refrain himself from grinning. Everything was just as he remembered. The smell of sea salt clinging to the evening breeze while waves crashed onto the beach. Seagulls cawing overhead as they fought over the day’s catch. Boats

of all shapes and sizes pulled onto the sand, oars neatly stowed inside. Chirping insects relentlessly beating against his ears. Thousands of hazy yellow lights as far as the eye could see, following the landscape until reaching the mountains far in the distance. One of which, so intimately familiar it might as well be engraved onto his heart, immediately raised his hopes.

“Home sweet home!”

Ryuko felt oddly detached.

No matter how much she disliked Jecht, the guy was an asshole, she was happy for him. He deserved this. Because getting dragged away from one's world? That sucked. But knowing everyone think you died? It was the worst possible feeling in the world. Something she would never wish on anybody. Nobody deserved that. But at least Jecht always knew his family was still alive. That one day he could walk through the front door and everything would be better. A psychopathic bastard didn't destroy everything he loved.

Biting the inside of her cheek, she blinked, taken by surprise when Jecht turned around, one hand bashfully rubbing his neck.

“Look... uh... Ryuko.”

Jecht found himself forcing the words between his teeth.

Damn it, he never was any good at apologizing or thanking someone. Hell, most of their troubles on that other world were because he refused to apologize for crap he pulled. Particularly at the beginning, when he still drank. But no matter how sappy or stupid it sounded, this time was different. Which meant buckling down and acting like a goddamn man, “I gotta hand it to ya. Never expected a ticket home. So, I guess what I'm tryin' to say is... I owe you one.”

“You hit your head or something?”

Ryuko knew Jecht was being sincere. But like hell was she going to let him live it down, "Maybe I should come back when you're feeling normal. Because this is gettin' awkward."

And just like that, his mood - hell, his entire outlook on the day - brightened.

"Ha! You're nothing but a snot-nosed brat, ya know that?"

With no love lost between them, Jecht yanked Seafang out of the sand. He could hear Ryuko saying something. But at the moment, he didn't give a rat's ass, not when something more important needed to be said, "Hey Auron, cheer up! You look like someone died! C'mon! You. Me. Kaiyo's cooking. I'll even introduce you and everything."

"I appreciate the offer, but there's something I need to do."

This wasn't the first time Jecht promised something along those lines. And for that reason, Auron stared across the darkening waters, "Before Braska's... passing, I promised to watch his daughter should anything happen to him."

"Well... damn."

Jecht was at a loss for words. He hadn't expected Auron to just up and bail. At least, not so soon, "You plan on at least visiting? Nobody's gonna believe I saved yer sorry ass if you're not around to back me up."

"Without the Keyblade that would be quite impossible."

Grimacing somberly behind the upturned collar of his haori, Auron listened to the waves gently crashing onto the beach. Despite their differences, Jecht had been his friend. A comrade he could trust. Someone who watched his back. Thrusting his zanbatou into the sand next to his feet, he turned around, hand extended, "I'm afraid this is farewell."

“Geez, talk about cuttin’ to the chase.”

He tried everything possible to avoid the answer. But with begrudging acceptance, Jecht grumbled before slapping his hand against Auron’s, “Fine. Have it yer way. But things aren’t gonna be the same without you constantly annoyin’ me.”

Auron couldn’t help but laugh, a gruff, almost gravelly, sound, “If Kaiyo’s half the woman you’ve claimed she is, I’m sure you’ll manage fine without me.”

“Yeah... yeah...”

Rubbing his calloused fingers along the curve of his neck, Jecht went through four different retorts to Auron’s comment. But none of them felt right. They were... he didn’t know... off or something. So instead, he decided to move onto something different, “Ryuko, hope yer -”

“No thanks.”

She stomped her sneaker against the sand, kicking up a small cloud of the stuff as she glared straight into Jecht’s eyes. No way was she sticking around. She had crap to do. And making Satsuki wait more than another second was out of the question, “I’ve already got plans.”

“Like you got the choice!”

Using the difference between their heights to its full advantage, Jecht loomed over Ryuko, “You’re staying for some good, old-fashioned Destiny Islands dinner! And there’ll be no ifs, ands or buts about it!”

“Are you freaking deaf? What the hell did I just say!?”

“A whole lotta noise,” Jecht scoffed out the side of his mouth, not a drop of shame in his voice. For a moment, he believed Ryuko matured. Not much. Only enough to no longer be an arrogant punk.

But it looked like he was wrong. Snapping his right arm sideways, he grasped Seafang before yanking the massive greatsword onto his shoulder, “Hey, old man! Go and take Auron home! Ryuko’s gonna stay for Kaiyo’s delicious cooking?”

“Is that right?”

The corner of her mouth twitched alongside the left side of her face. Jecht really wanted to do this, didn’t he? Alright, have it his way. But she wasn’t angry. Far from it. As a matter of fact, she was quite calm. But after trying to be polite to the guy, letting him talk down to her like an asshole wasn’t something she was just gonna ignore.

Yet before she could crack her knuckles, Jecht vanished in a familiar flash of white light, leaving Seafang to tumble onto the ground.

“... huh?”

“Oh ho-ho-ho!”

He needed nothing more than the slightest flick of his wrist. A quick swish, as the kids would say. But before the argument devolved into something predictably brutish, Merlin teleported Jecht into the ocean. Not too far. That would be exceptionally dangerous. Merely a few hundred feet from the shore. Far enough that the belligerent man’s string of inappropriate curses as he plummeted into the water barely reached their ears.

“Ahem, if you’re finished, I must be off.”

Once more removing sand from his slippers, Merlin rolled up his sleeve and looked at a watch that hadn’t been there a moment ago, “Things to do. People to see. Why, right before we left, some rather curious teenagers wanted to meet me. Ryuko, can I count on you to inform Beatrix of this development?”

“Uh... yeah...”

For a moment, Ryuko didn't hear the question. Nothing registered. She was too busy leaning around Auron, staring at Jecht with widening eyes as the bastard fell into the ocean. Beatrix took pleasure from beating into her skull that magic was limited only by one's imagination. And training. Lots and lots of studying, training and innate skill. But this was totally different in every way! All Merlin did was wave his wand. And suddenly, just like that, Jecht was gone. Like he hadn't even been standing in front of her.

And why the hell was Auron acting so cool about it?

"Yeah, I was plannin' on heading back to Alexandria."

Staring at Auron, who simply shrugged like this sort of thing happened often, Ryuko promptly shifted topics, "Hey, listen. Isn't there some way for Auron to visit? This just seems kinda wrong."

"Hmm..."

It was a fascinating question. Albeit, one that went against the rules. Then again, he was an innovator! And most of those rules were created by him! Nevertheless, it was not intrigue or interest which fueled his curiosity. No, it was something much more serious. For he understood *exactly* why Ryuko asked such an unorthodox question. Beneath the tough façade she'd painstakingly crafted laid a heart scarred by loss. Her only family, friends and everyone she knew. All of them gone, enveloped by the darkness which had devoured her world. Jecht's situation must have brought those painful memories to the surface.

"... it's a little unorthodox. And by that, I mean it goes against the very teachings of being a certified, verified sorcerer. But... eh... I won't tell anyone if you don't."

As he stroked his beard, fully aware of the sudden awkwardness, Merlin raised his arms, blew a strand of hair off his nose and huffed, "Now then... alakazam!"

There was a *poof* of white smoke.

For a moment, Ryuko swore she heard a soft unwinding of springs and gears.

And then a purple clasped bag appeared out of nowhere, floating above the beach.

“Now where was it?”

Reaching into the bag, first with his right arm and then most of his body, Merlin’s voice gradually grew fainter and fainter, “Ho-ho! So, that’s where it scampered off to! Blasted dreams and nightmares! Oh, that’s not... ah, here it is! Right where I left it! It’s a... oh my!”

The moment he removed himself from the confines of his bag, Merlin realized he made an enormous mistake. Falling backwards, his slippers stumbling against the sand, he composed himself when two steady hands grabbed his shoulders, stopping him from taking an awful tumble.

“Ya know, for a powerful wizard, you’re clumsy as hell.”

Ryuko stepped back only when Merlin physically adjusted his cap and glasses, “Why didn’t you just ‘magic’ the thing or whatever out of your bag?”

“I... hmm... why *didn’t* I think of that? Oh well. What’s done is done!”

Auron’s eye widened when he saw what Merlin was holding, “Is that...”

“Yes! A Star Shard! Oh, just a moment...”

Brushing himself off, something which required removing piles of sand out of his slippers, Merlin rubbed the ruby-red artifact against his wrist, “Where was I? Ah, right! This is a Star Shard! They’re quite rare, you see. And special. One must simply concentrate on their

destination with everything in their heart, and they'll find themselves transported across the Realm of Light in no time flat!"

"Hey! Satsuki has one of those."

It might have looked different, the colors and overall shape were completely wrong, but she recognized the Star Shard, "You sayin' there are more of these things?"

Merlin couldn't believe his ears. If his ears were, in fact, not deceiving him, it sounded like Ryuko found her sister. All without his help. And not for a lack of trying! While his priority was resealing Ardyn Lucis Caelum - this time, doubly so - he had visited more than a dozen worlds. Using magical spells and tools, he attempted to locate people with names from the long list Ryuko gave Yen Sid. But it had been for nothing. And with the Realm of Light being nearly infinite in size, limited only by one's imagination, there were hundreds of worlds left to search.

Yet Ryuko somehow found Satsuki.

The heart truly was a beautiful and amazing thing.

"Oh! Oh my! Wonderful! Simply wonderful!"

After taking a moment to regain his composure, Merlin leapt into the air, somehow clicking his heels together, "When this matter is settled, I do hope you can introduce me to Satsuki when you get the chance. Not everyone has the ability to control a Star Shard, you know. It requires a strong heart and unwavering focus. For the slightest loss of concentration can lead to disaster!"

"Yup, that's Satsuki," Ryuko rolled her eyes, "Focused to a freaking fault."

"God damn it!"

All but propelling himself out of the water, Jecht vaulted over the old man, Ryuko and Auron before landing on the beach, dripping wet and seriously pissed, "You're gonna -"

Intending to give the sorcerer a piece of his mind, his anger evaporated at the strange glint in Merlin's eye. He saw the innocent-looking piece of wood flick through the air, faint bursts of magic following in its wake, "Err... what I meant was... what's that? Some kind of fancy jewel?"

"Ho-ho! Not quite!"

With a swish of his wrist, every drop of excess water was carefully removed from Jecht's body, "Well... maybe. I suppose you can think of it as the answer to your problem. But it's not quite ready. I'll need to head home and tinker around for a bit. These things tend to be rather tricky. Even I cannot use them willy-nilly! At least, not without taking proper precautions."

"And when it's finished?"

"Now, now. Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Merlin not so much pocketed the Star Shard as teleport the dangerous artifact into his bag, "It'll be ready when it's ready. Not a moment sooner!"

"Well, I suppose this is farewell."

Through his single working eye, Auron glanced at Jecht. The man who proclaimed himself above these 'sorts of things' was doing his best to remain stoic. But he could tell Jecht wasn't taking things well. Shaking his head at the thought, he turned towards the one who made this possible, "Ryuko, you have my deepest gratitude. If there's anything I can do to -"

"It's fine."

Clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth, Ryuko interrupted the older warrior, "I promised to help you. And I did. There's nothing

more to it.”

“Braska always said the same thing.”

Hidden behind the high collar of his haori, Auron couldn't help but smirk. Ryuko might have little in common with Braska - at least, in terms of their respective personalities - but she possessed the same desire to help others, “Perhaps not in so many words. But close enough. And every time he did so, it always got us into trouble. One day, when you're ready, you'll make a fine Keyblade Master.”

As he chuckled softly, not so much at the memories faded through the relentless passage of time but Ryuko's reaction, he turned to Merlin, zanbatou resting on his shoulder, “Whenever you're ready.”

“Yes! Of course! Now then...”

Rolling up his sleeves one at a time, and then twice more when they refused to listen, Merlin swishes his wand once. In a flash, the purple bag vanished. And swishing it twice, and then thrice, magic and light swirled through the air, “... Presto!”

“So *that's* what it looks like...”

The bright flash of light stung his eyes. But still scratching his neck, Jecht didn't grumble until the last trace of Auron vanished from the world. So, this was it, huh? Crap, he was going to miss the bastard. Auron had grown on him. Like an infection. But as much as he wanted the guy to stay, at least for a few hours, there was no way that was gonna happen. Just like it was impossible to convince Ryuko. He didn't know why he was even bothering to try. It was stupid. But there was something important he had to get off his chest. Something he'd all but forgotten until just a few seconds ago.

“Hey, this gonna sound weird, but I'm not the first one to get dragged off-world, [ya know](#).”

Ryuko frowned, blinking owlishly at the sudden confession. What the hell? She expected the asshole to talk about his family. Maybe guilt her into coming to his house. But she hadn't expected Jecht to start talking nonsense, "Huh?"

"What a drag..."

A hiss passed between Jecht's teeth.

Had he stuttered or something?

"It was a long time ago. Sixty, maybe seventy years," shuffling towards the ocean, he stopped with the tides, water lapping at his ankles, "This teacher's kid, smart as hell, suddenly up and vanished. Out of nowhere. The last anyone saw the kid, he was rowing towards Besaid Island."

With the last rays of daylight rapidly vanishing, Jecht stared at the island little more than an hour's trip away, palm trees and foliage painted purple and blue by the setting sun, "Everyone looked for the kid. But he was gone. Like he never existed. All they found was his boat. Then one day, had to be six... maybe seven... years later, the kid comes back, acting like nothing happened. The whole island celebrated. Only the next day, he tells his parents this was the last time they'd see him, walked to the beach... this very spot... and never returned."

As much as she tried figuring out where Jecht was going, Ryuko drew a blank, "Does this story have a point?"

"Hold your chocobos, I'm getting there."

Running a hand through his unruly, more than usual, hair, Jecht folded his arms, "Anyway, I'm talkin' about this because when Auron mentioned you having a Keyblade, and after you summoned the damn thing, I remembered something. The day the kid came back... from wherever he went... a fisherman was patching his boat. Right over there."

He nodded towards the line of beached rowboats, "Don't know how much of this is true. But the fisherman... my old man's man... said the kid was holding a strange weapon. One that disappeared into some sort of dark light. Ring any bells?"

"A Keyblade?"

"Who knows," Jecht unfolded his arms, sighed and turned around, "But the kid's family's gone. Parents didn't have another brat. Cousins up and died. Hardly anyone remembers more than someone once left the islands. At least, before me. Hell, if my old man hadn't drilled the story into my skull, I wouldn't have remembered anything. Then again, who could forget a name as stupid as Xehanort."

"Xehanort..."

Something *snapped* inside Ryuko's heart.

"... yeah, that is a stupid name."

It had to be a coincidence. But after repeating the bastard's name, Ryuko clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. There was too much about Xehanort that didn't add up. The guy was creepy as hell. Every time he talked, it felt like the bastard was weaseling his way into her mind. It made her skin crawl. She didn't trust him. Hell, even if the guy was on the level, she'd *never* trust him. Not after his goddamn psychopath of an apprentice destroyed her world, killing millions of innocent people.

"Alright, fine. I'll stay for dinner," scoffing out the side of her mouth, she glared straight into Jecht's eyes, "But let's get one thing straight. You do anything funny and I'll pound your face into the goddamn ground! Got it!?"

"Ha!"

Jecht laughed from the pit of his stomach at the threat, “You got guts, Ryuko!”

Kicking his foot against Seafang, he kicked the greatsword into his waiting fingers, “But quit yer worrying. I don’t know what crappy food you’ve had, but Kaiyo’s cooking is the best in the entire universe!”

A memory, almost distant, of Mako’s mom’s mystery croquettes flashed across Ryuko’s mind as she begrudgingly followed Jecht into town.

[“I *seriously* doubt that.”](#)

Last edited: Oct 5, 2018

Chapter 8.4

While she's missed out on several worlds, Ryuko has always been one step ahead of Terra, Aqua or Ven when it comes to visiting worlds (ignoring Radiant Gardens). She was on Olympus Coliseum long before them, which leads to something interesting. Does Hades mention Ryuko to Terra? Does Hercules, when talking to Ventus about becoming a true hero, mention Jecht, the previous champion who vanished? Is Zack disappointed because he doesn't have the chance for a rematch against Jecht after getting his ass kicked the first time (with Jecht physically tying one of his own hands behind his back)? Just imagine Hades convincing Terra to fight Jecht in exchange for learning how to control his darkness. Keyblade or not, Terra would have one of the most difficult fights of his life.

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/8/8d/Sc00042.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140315011941>]

Grilled fish clung to her tongue. She still remembered the exotic sauces. How the fish didn't look anything like the fish back home and tasted familiar. Like tuna or salmon. Only it was green and purple.

"Ugh, I'm stuffed."

Her sneakers scrapped against the ground with every shuffling step. Rubbing her neck, exhaustion finally settling into her muscles after one hell of a day, Ryuko yawned. And then did it a second time while stretching her arms. Damn it. As much as she hated giving the jackass credit for anything, he'd been right about one thing. Maybe it hadn't been quite as good as Mako's mom's cooking. Not by a long shot. But Kaiyo certainly knew her stuff. And nobody needed to worry about having poison control on speed dial for mystery meat Tuesdays.

But everything feeling like lead weights didn't explain the heaviness growing inside her heart.

Or why she stopped in the middle of the street.

"Damn it!"

The way Kaiyo's expression changed when she opened the door was something she'd never forget. It was... too real. It reminded her of so many things. The tears. The wrenching sobs as she threw herself into Jecht's arms. She didn't think seeing Jecht behave normal would *hurt* that much. She'd been ready for almost anything. But watching them... listening to Jecht admit she saved his life... had brought back painful memories. Dinner with Mako's family. That evening on Mikisugi's ship with everyone. The weekends she spent with Satsuki away from school.

If things had been different, she would have been fine.

But then Kaiyo began thanking her over and over again, tears streaming down her face.

And the kid... Tidus.

She didn't know much about the kid. He couldn't have been older than three. Which was why she wasn't surprised when he started bawling his eyes out. But Jecht's reaction when the kid latched onto his waist? The bastard might have complained about Tidus being a snot-nosed crybaby making him look soft, but the grin on his face was unmistakable. He was happy to be home. And even if it meant getting snot on his pants, he didn't have a single complaint.

"I guess he's not that bad of a guy."

Biting the inside of her cheek as she stepped onto the beach, sand falling around her sneakers and the nearly full moon rising over the mountains behind town, Ryuko thought over what she said. Every

single word. And with her eyebrow twitching, planted a hand against her face.

“What the hell am I saying?”

Why was she acting like an idiot? One heartwarming reunion didn't change her opinion of the half-naked jackass. Alright, that settled it! She was done with Destiny Islands. The sooner she left this world, the faster she could get back to Satsuki. After dealing with never-ending shit on a constant basis for almost a full week, relaxing with her sister was the only thing on her mind.

“Slow... down... Riku!”

Said boy ignored his best friend as he raced down the beach. Since he was one year older, he was stronger *and* faster. And once he crossed the finish line, a few branches they collected on the way over, the record would be seven to four! No way Sora was gonna beat him!

Only there was someone standing in front of the finish line.

He knew most of the grown-ups in town. Everybody knew each other. But she looked different. Her clothes were strange. There was a weird red color in her hair. And she was wearing strange armor over her left arm. Breathing heavily as he slowed to a stop, sandals kicking against the sand, Riku stared at the woman. And she stared right back at him. He blinked, and she blinked right back.

“You're the one who brought Tidus's dad home, right?”

“Uh...”

The question caught Ryuko with her pants down. She never expected a kid younger than Mataro asking something so goddamn strange, “... yeah. How'd you know?”

“All the grown-ups are talking about you,” the kid answered matter-of-factly, like it was the most obvious thing in the world, as his friend finally caught up, panting and severely out of breath, “I’m Riku! He’s Sora! We’re best friends!”

Still gasping for air, Sora waved at the grown-up, grinning widely enough to expose several missing teeth, “Hi!”

And just like that, out of the freaking blue, Ryuko collapsed under the massive wave of awkwardness. She opened and closed her mouth several times, a confused mumble coming from the back of her throat. Damn it, she wasn’t any good with kids. Sure, she could tolerate them. That was fine. But dealing with them? *Talking* with them? Crap, she couldn’t handle that much trouble! Mako was better with those sorts of things. Because whenever *she* tried speaking to kids, even if she was being nothing but super nice, it always ended with them crying and making her look like the freaking bad guy.

“Uh... hi.”

She desperately searched for an escape. Maybe she could run away, get onto Threadcutter and flee into the Lanes Between. But that wouldn’t work. At least, not yet. So, with yet another grumble passing between her lips, she pointed in a random direction over her shoulder, “Hey, it’s been nice, but I really gotta -”

It was like someone threw a switch. Or gave Mako sugar. One moment, Riku was acting like any normal kid. And the next, his eyes lit up. Almost enough to make her flinch, “What’s the outside world like?”

“Well... um...”

Ryuko found herself drawing a blank. Kids were too excitable. Most of them believed anything as long as it sounded convincing. You could lie straight to their faces and they’d believe every single word. Wait a goddamn second. That sounded a lot like Mako, “Alright, you see those stars? They’re all different worlds.”

She didn't know if it would work. Or if Sora and Riku were less gullible than Mako. It wasn't difficult. She didn't have enough fingers to count the number of times Mako fell into one of Satsuki's - or that bitch Maiko's - traps. But thinking quickly, several possible ideas popping into her head, she pointed at several random stars, "That world has a city with a massive castle. On that world, it's always raining. On *that* world, there's this guy with fire for hair who talks a big game. And... uh... on that world there's an annoying six-armed guy constantly stealing people's stuff."

"Awesome..."

Riku latched onto every single word. He could imagine everything. A castle reaching into the clouds. A world where it never stopped raining, just like during the summer when the bad storms blew through the islands, "One day, I'm gonna visit those worlds."

Turning to Sora, he grinned, exposing several missing teeth, "We're gonna visit all those worlds, right Sora?"

"Y-Yeah."

Fidgeting in place, Sora stared at the sand around his sandals. It wasn't that he was scared. He wasn't! It was just... actually leaving the islands? He really wanted to explore the outside world. But what about his mom and dad? He didn't want to leave them. His face scrunched into a childish grimace. He bit the side of his mouth. But when Riku nudged him in the chest and grinned, he couldn't help but feel better.

"Do you have a cool sword like Tidus's dad?"

Ryuko blinked at Riku's eagerness, "Huh?"

"Sora and me... we saw this awesome sword outside Tidus's house," Riku stared at the grown-up, "It looked really cool. Do you have one like it?"

“Afraid not. Sorry.”

While Riku was talking to the strange woman, Sora stared at the red sword strapped to her back. Because she was so much taller than them, he hadn't noticed it until she turned towards Riku. It was so weird-looking. Some of the other grown-ups had swords for when red chocobos came down from the mountains. But none of them looked like the scissors his mom kept in the kitchen, “Why's your sword look like a scissor?”

“Uh...”

Her thoughts ground to a halt. Oh crap! She totally forgot about the Scissor Blade! Then, after breaking into a cold sweat, Ryuko realized she was being stupid. Why did it matter if the kid... Sora or whatever his name was... saw the Scissor Blade? It didn't mean crap, “... no reason. Hey, you want to see something cool?”

A deep breath cleared her mind.

Holding out her arm, careful not to stand too close to the kids, she reached into her heart, searching for that familiar power and light. And with a half-smirk pulling against her lips, she clenched her fingers into a fist, Threadcutter manifesting alongside an explosion of crimson stars, “Check this out!”

“Wow...”

Sora couldn't believe his eyes. One moment the woman's hand was empty. And the next, she was holding something amazing, “What is it?”

Ryuko shrugged, blinked, grunted and scratched her cheek. In that specific order, “Eh... the name doesn't matter. The important thing is that it's way better than Jecht's stupid-looking sword, right?”

“Uh huh!”

Somewhere across the vast infiniteness of the Realm of Light, she could almost hear Beatrix's exasperation. The woman was probably shaking her head, wondering why she was acting like the Keyblade was a toy. But even if that was the case, and Beatrix was gonna punish her when she got back to Alexandria, Ryuko couldn't find the energy to care. This wasn't the first time she didn't see eye to eye with her master. And like hell would it be the last. Don't tell random people on the street about the Keyblade. Don't meddle in a world's affairs. Stop using Threadcutter to melt Steiner's armor. Don't provoke the Tantarion in the library and blame Steiner.

The list went on and on.

But her train of thought abruptly derailed when Sora and Riku reached towards Threadcutter, causing her to quickly yank the Keyblade above her head.

"Hey! Watch it!"

As the Keyblade flickered before vanishing entirely, leaving nothing behind but fading crimson wisps of light dancing around her fingers, Ryuko ignored Sora and Riku's disappointed pouts. She wasn't an idiot. They had to be four, maybe five years old. Maybe she wasn't good with kids. But letting two random kids touch one of the most dangerous things in existence?

Yeah, she wasn't that stupid.

"No touching."

Her knuckles cracked one by one as she flexed her fingers, traces of magic still clinging to her skin, "I'd get into a lot of trouble if either of you got hurt."

"Um..."

Sora looked at Riku, who was staring between his sandals at the foamy water, before turning back to the grown-up, "... then why'd

you show us?”

“Because I wanted to. That’s why.”

Nothing more needed to be said. Because that was the goddamn truth. She wanted to show them Threadcutter. It was that simple. And it had nothing to do with one-upping Jecht’s ugly sword, “Unless you got a problem with that?”

“N-No...”

It was like someone stabbed her heart with a knife. She felt her blood run cold when Sora appeared on the verge of tears. Had she really sounded that mean? Opening her mouth several times as she tried thinking of how to salvage the situation, she eventually settled on the usual, “Besides, it ain’t like you’re strong enough to hold it. Both of you are kinda scrawny. No muscles or anything.”

And just like that, Sora stopped sniffing.

“Says you!”

“Yeah, says me,” she smirked when the kid pouted. That was a relief. For a minute, she was convinced he’d start crying, “Now if ya don’t mind, I got things to do and -”

“How do I get stronger?”

The question stopped Ryuko dead in her tracks.

Or rather, it was Riku’s eagerness.

For a moment, Ryuko felt her grin slip. Her lips twitched. The amusement faded from her eyes. Maybe it was exhaustion finally making her woozy, but something about Riku’s question made her think. Even if the kid wanted a Keyblade, and she was an uncaring bitch, it wasn’t like she could just *give* him one. The world didn’t work that way. To get a Keyblade, it had to be passed down from master to student. Like how Yen Sid gave Mickey the Star Seeker that *he*

got from Merlin. Or they earned one, like how she obtained Threadcutter. Those were the only two options. There was no 'work hard and earn a Keyblade' choice.

But for some reason, the thought of telling them the truth made her feel awful.

"It... uh... depends."

It was like hearing everything in stereo.

"On what?"

Ryuko flinched at the hope radiating from Sora and Riku. It was just so... so... pure. It made her feel like crap for stringing them along, "Well... uh... you need to pass a test."

Upon hearing the word 'test,' Sora slouched, "Aw..."

"She's kidding, Sora," Riku tried cheering up his friend before adding in a much less certain tone, "Grown-ups do it all the time."

"I'm not kidding."

The identical looks of disappointment were priceless. But damn it, watching the hope drain from their hearts made her feel like a bitch. She needed to work fast. Rolling her eyes, Ryuko exhaled loudly enough to sound annoyed before crouching in front of Sora and Riku. Not too low. Just low enough to look them straight in the eyes. Plus, she scowled. But in a totally friendly way, not trying to scare them or anything. And once they were paying attention, she raised three fingers, "Fine. I'll tell ya. Just stop lookin' at me like that. But you gotta keep it a secret, alright?"

When they nodded, perhaps a little too quickly, she scratched her cheek.

"First of all, you need a strong heart. One full of light. So... uh... that means being brave, but not stupid. And... um... making the right

choices and stuff.”

As she continued listing the first things that came to mind, Ryuko realized she wasn't bullshitting them. At least, not as much as she thought. No wonder the advice sounded familiar in her head. She was telling Sora and Riku everything Beatrix told *her*. Maybe not quite as elegantly. But it was the same information, only jumbled and confused.

“... and there are three rules you always gotta follow.”

Curling her fingers one at a time, she put on her best game-face, “Kick the butts of anyone trying to hurt your friends. Don't let anything stand in the way of your dreams. And no matter what happens... even if everything looks gloomy and bad... always trust your heart.”

Somewhere along the line, the advice transformed into her experiences from Honnouji Academy. It was embarrassing. It should have *been* embarrassing. But for a weird reason, it felt perfectly fine.

“Trust my heart...”

Riku looked at his chest, an uncharacteristic maturity in his voice, “Will I ever be as strong as you?”

“I seriously doubt it.”

Shrugging off the silver haired kid's ineffective crocodile tears, Ryuko pushed herself back onto her feet, “And seriously, quit asking awkward-soundin' questions! You're a kid! Start acting like one. Because there's no way a pair of snot-nosed brats like you will *ever* be strong enough to take me down!”

Riku pouted with every ounce of childish pride inside his heart, “One day I'm gonna explore the outside world! Then you'll be sorry!”

“Heh... is that a challenge?”

For some unexpected reason, maybe she was getting woozy, Ryuko rustled the kid's hair, "Alright, half-pint. You wanna beat me? Fine. Whenever you're ready, I'll be waiting to make you eat those words. Just don't cry when you lose."

"I'll show you!"

Kicking his foot against the sand, Riku tried being upset with the grown-up. He'd show her! No matter what it took, he was gonna prove his heart was strong! But as he pouted, he found himself smiling. He laughed, slowly but surely. And nudging Sora's arm, he grinned at his best friend, "Bet I'm gonna get one of those fancy swords before you!"

"Not if I get one first!"

Without saying goodbye to the grown-up, Sora chased after Riku. But before leaving the beach, he paused, something bothering his heart. He never got the grown-up's name. And she'd been so nice to them. But then Riku called his name again. His smile faltered, just for a few seconds, before he turned back around, chasing after his best friend.

And watching them, laughing and playing like there was nothing wrong with the world, Ryuko's knuckles cracked one by one.

Now she got it.

Now she understood the warm feeling in her heart.

"I think... I think I get it now."

The confession came as a whisper on the wind as she held a hand over her heart. The only times she'd been happy... *truly* happy... had been with Mako and Senketsu. Even if Senketsu had complained about her weight, always getting in the last word on the stupidest little things, she'd give anything to have him back. And no matter what happened between then, despite Satsuki's stupid mind

games, Mako had never stopped believing in her. She was her best friend in the entire world. The only person besides Senketsu who truly understood her. A friend who always had her back.

And even after Senketsu... even after he went away... those few months with Mako, going to school, eating homemade lunches, beating the crap out of bullies, not have to worry about superpowered freaks, had been the best days of her life.

“What have I been doing?”

Since figuring out everything that happened, she'd had two goals. Find Mako and Satsuki. And beat the living shit out of Vanitas. Nothing else mattered. But the more she thought about it, the more that didn't make sense. After what happened at Honnouji Academy with Nui Harime, why the hell did she think revenge would work better the second time around? Stopping the masked bastard was fine. It was something everybody wanted! But the way she was doing things... letting anger and hatred build inside her heart... lashing out at Xehanort whenever he showed his wrinkled face... imagining her Keyblade smashing through Vanitas's mask... wouldn't work.

No matter how much she wished it would.

“Shit...”

Foamy water lapped at her feet as she stared at the ground, fists trembling and lips quivering. She didn't know what happened. But showing Threadcutter to Sora and Riku had changed something in her heart. It didn't make sense. She didn't understand why. But now, things were different. Instead of wanting to beat the crap out of Vanitas for destroying her world and scattering everyone she loved to the farthest corners of the Realm of Light, Ryuko found herself thinking about everyone she'd met since waking up in Lindblum. The people who went out of their way to help her.

Mickey. Regent Cid. Balthier. Gilgamesh. Yen Sid. Beatrix. Steiner. Queen Garnet. Aqua. Terra. Ven. Freya. Jecht. Auron. Merlin.

And now Riku and Sora.

Letting out a deep sigh, she closed her eyes as the tension, the feeling that nothing would ever change, vanished from her heart, leaving behind an empty calmness. Mako's smile flashed through her mind. She remembered the last words Mako said as she raced through the front door into the pouring rain. The encouragement and eagerness to watch her and Satsuki beat up the bad guy trying to take over the world. A harsh laugh escaped her throat as she chuckled, eyes slightly swimming.

"I've been a freaking idiot."

The next time she saw the masked bastard, even if it meant getting her ass kicked halfway to the brink of death, she was going to grind his face into the ground. Not for revenge. Or for what he did to their world.

Not anymore.

Now she was going to beat the living shit out of Vanitas to protect *everyone*.

To make sure kids like Sora and Riku didn't have to worry about their worlds getting sucked into darkness.

"It might not be cuter clothes..."

Ryuko laughed as she stared across the darkened ocean, a faint smirk pulling on her lips.

"... but I think this is what you meant, Senketsu."

Chapter 8.5

I enjoy writing comedic characters like Adelbert Steiner. He's exceptionally powerful. Enough that Ryuko cannot best him in single combat (when they're both holding back). But he's still someone who gets picked on by the world. For instance, Ryuko dumping a bucket of oglops on his bed. Or Ryuko blaming him for provoking the Tantarion, which rampaged through the library for more than twenty minutes. But, in Ryuko's defense, how the hell was she to know the magical book was guarded by a monster?

"Confound them!"

Clank! Clank! Clank!

The heavy armor did little to arrest his movements. Each step was accompanied by a loud *clank*, metal plates rubbing against each other. Yet barely out of breath despite having sprinted from the castle and back several times, Steiner continued his annoyed pace. Irritation drove him forward. Annoyance provided the necessary clarity of mind to race through the emptied streets, searching every merchant stand and darkened alleyway. Although the cool breeze whispering through Alexandria afforded some measure of noticeable relief, anger similar to a detonating bomb simmered inside his heart.

Clank! Clank! Clank!

His hands shook as he dashed down the main boulevard. So intense was his anger that he paid little attention to the pair of knights peeking into the Morning Star Bar. He observed only their nervousness, apparent by how they were staring through the establishment's windows. Quickly making a mental note to chastise their demeanor upon finishing his search, Steiner returned to the matter at hand, continuing towards the statue of General Madelene standing guard over the city's main entrance.

Then he abruptly stopped.

And with his eye twitching, he pivoted on the spot before sprinting back the way he came.

Clank! Clank! Clank!

“There you are!”

It was only thanks to his self-control, necessary for someone of his position, that he didn’t shout at the top of his lungs, “What do you think you’re doing!?”

Yet that was more than enough for both knights to jump out of their armor.

“C-Captain!”

Breireicht’s heart almost left his body. Alongside a series of unintelligible noises, he fell backwards onto the ground. But quickly standing back up, helmet skewed to the right and dirt clinging to his armor, he raised one shaking hand to his forehead, “We were just -”

“I do not wish to hear it!”

Clank!

As he shook his gauntlet-covered fist in their general direction, Steiner focused the majority of his annoyance upon Weimar. Breireicht would never do something like this. At least, not without help. Which meant *Weimar* was the perpetrator, “There is absolutely nothing you can say that excuses such flagrant insubordination!”

This time, against Steiner’s expectations, Weimar thought it wise to speak, “But captain...”

“Enough!”

Apocalyptic frustration erupted inside Steiner's heart. How dare they continue this charade! Did they not realize he'd caught them in the act? But he contained himself. At least, for the moment, "Explain yourselves! For what reason did you disregard your duties as Her Majesty's sworn protectors?"

Breireicht visibly wilted under the immense force of their captain's withering glower, "We *were* patrolling as you ordered, captain! We swear! But there was this woman, you see. We followed her here and -"

Steiner's eyes twitched as he angrily pointed at the knight, "And *why* were you following some random woman instead of dealing with the Unversed?"

"Because... uh..."

If hundreds of Unversed were marching through the streets, Weimar would have gladly leapt head-first into the horde of monsters. Anything to not deal with their captain's apocalyptic frustration, "... because she had Ryuko's Scissor Blade, captain."

There was a pregnant, almost awkward, silence.

"Rubbish!"

Did they expect him to believe such foolishness? As if some common criminal could steal the Scissor Blade! Not only did he train Ryuko himself, including how to prevent one's enemy from disarming them, she never went anywhere without the blasted sword! And even if it were possible for someone to gain possession of the Scissor Blade, he highly doubted Ryuko wouldn't be far behind. In fact, if such a ludicrous excuse had *any* semblance of truth and wasn't merely Weimar and Breireicht's attempt at getting out of patrolling the streets for any Unversed, he would be ordering them to piece together the unfortunate thief's broken and shattered body.

"Stand aside!"

Pushing the two knights aside, he stopped towards the window. The paned glass was stained by dirt and grime. The once clear surface had turned pale yellow over the years, making it difficult to distinguish anything from everything. But sure enough, there was someone inside the pub. A woman judging by their fuzzy silhouette. Pressing his forehead against the glass to get a better look, Steiner hummed. He grumbled in the back of his throat. It appeared they were right. She *did* have a Scissor Blade. The weapon laid upon a table, its familiar crimson noticeable even through the glass.

He could understand why they believed she somehow stole it from Ryuko.

Yet looking closer at the overall shape and length, fuzzy and indistinct as things were, confessed the truth.

Clank!

“You imbeciles!”

This time, he actually *did* shout, “That’s Ryuko’s sister! Not some underhanded thief!”

As much as he wished to point out their egregious incompetence, particularly when they were given detailed descriptions of Miss Satsuki for this very occasion, Steiner decided to focus on the matter at hand. Pushing through Weimar and Breireicht, he stepped closer to the door, pausing with one hand pressed against the wooden frame, “I shall go inside and speak with her! Do not allow anyone to enter this establishment!”

“Yes, Captain!”

“Of course, Captain!”

From the moment he stepped into the establishment, the thickening warmth slammed against his face. His throat was parched. His armor felt increasingly uncomfortable. But he ignored such minor

inconveniences. Yet as the door swung shut behind him, he frowned. No answer? Perhaps the crackling flames masked his arrival. Nodding at the idea, which seemed like a reasonable excuse, he approached her table, the floorboards creaking with every step.

But just as he prepared to introduce himself, a voice bearing resemblance to a sheathed sword cut through the tension.

“You must be Adelbert Steiner.”

She’d sensed the knight’s presence long before he walked through the door. Despite the peaceful ambience permeating the Morning Star Bar, the crackling fireplace replacing the overt friendliness shared by the various patrons long after they departed for their homes, she’d heard Adelbert Steiner’s bombastic temperament. Her blue eyes stared at the orange-red flames before closing. A sigh passed through lips. And opening her eyes once more, she glanced aside.

“It’s an honor to speak with a man of your commendable and respectful reputation.”

The familiarity in which she addressed him by name was momentarily baffling. Could she have spoken with the townspeople? He was, after all, the captain of the Knights of Pluto. But that was unlikely. If she’d been here long enough to ask such questions, someone would have noticed the Scissor Blade. Even though it bore noticeable differences to Ryuko’s, merchants and civilians were unlikely to tell them apart. He would have been alerted to her arrival long before either of his men decided to peep through the window.

“The honor is all mine!”

Snapping both feet together with an audible *clank*, he raised one hand to his forehead, “So please allow me to properly introduce myself! I am Adelbert Steiner, Captain of the Knights of Pluto, Her Majesty’s sworn protector!”

This was quite the fortuitous event. He'd known Ryuko wouldn't rest until she found her sister and friends. Yet to find Satsuki in such a short period of time? It was incredulous. Perhaps there was something to Beatrix's claims about hearts never truly being separated, "Might I presume you've already reunited with Ryuko?"

"You would presume correctly."

She leaned backwards, burning embers brushing against her mind, while drawing both hands into her lap, fingers clasped around each other, "Please lower your arm. There's no reason for someone of your stature and position to salute me."

"Very well..."

Steiner was impressed by her respectful disposition. It stood in stark contrast with her sister's blunt demeanor. A refreshing change of pace, if he could be so bold. But halfway through that thought, he shook his head and mentally slapped himself. This wasn't the time to worry about such inconsequential tidbits! He wasn't standing several feet from a roaring fireplace to shoot the breeze! He was the captain of the Knights of Pluto, not some common merchant!

"Then please gather your belongings and meet me outside."

Sharply pivoting, he turned around, once more facing the exit, "The castle isn't far. But with monsters lurking in the shadows, the streets aren't safe this time of night."

"While I appreciate the offer, I must nevertheless decline your assistance."

Crossing her legs, Satsuki's expression remained unchanged, "Ryuko insisted that we meet here. To leave with you, however noble your intentions, would be spitting in the face of that promise."

"... fair enough."

He was conflicted. This went against his orders to ensure Miss Satsuki's safety should she arrive upon Alexandria. But as much as he wanted to press the matter, if she possessed even the faintest modicum of Ryuko's stubbornness, attempting to dislodge her from the establishment would end disastrously. For him. Not Satsuki. Still, he had his duty. He couldn't leave her alone. Miss Satsuki's safety was paramount! Which meant, whether he liked it or not, there was only one option remaining on the table.

Clank!

Walking a fair distance away from the crackling flames, he folded his hands behind his back, coughed to clear his throat, and grumbled, "Then I shall wait alongside you!"

"If that is your wish, there is little I can do to dissuade you."

Satsuki propped her cheek against her knuckles, "But you needn't waste your time. I'm quite capable of defending myself."

"Nonsense!"

Steiner balked at the dishonorable request, "You are Ryuko's sister. Your safety comes above all else, including my own life."

A thick eyebrow quirked at the unexpected admission. Yet surprise quickly gave way to amusement. Her lips curled into a grin concealed from the knight. And with a scoff building in the back of her throat, she callously answered, "I suppose that is your prerogative. But I'm certain whatever afterlife exists beyond the realm of imagination won't be enough to prevent Ryuko from hunting you down should you die."

Even though she could not see the knight, Satsuki sensed his veiled amusement.

"Ryuko is competent. As my student, I expect no less. But she's yet to best me in combat."

In response to his answer, Steiner swore he heard the faintest of chuckles. Perhaps it was nothing more than the crackling flames playing tricks on his mind. But whether Miss Satsuki's laughter was genuine or merely a figment of his imagination wasn't important. There was something else troubling his heart. A growing whisper that refused to fade. And as the seconds turned into minutes, sweat pouring down his face and stiffness entering his muscles, his frown deepened. But that wasn't enough. He remained focused. Vigilant for the slightest traces of darkness.

It was only when his legs began to cramp after nearly half an hour that he finally voiced his concerns.

"Forgive me, Miss Satsuki, but how long have you been waiting for Ryuko?"

Eyes closed, posture relaxed, Satsuki roused herself from her meditation, "Five and a half hours. Give or take."

Clank!

Steiner almost collapsed under the weight of his own surprise.

Stumbling backwards, he leaned over the nearest table, hands balled into fists. He couldn't believe it! Even if the admission came from Miss Satsuki, and he had no reason to think she wasn't telling the truth, the assertion was simply incredulous! They had their differences, and perhaps she refused to take most of her Keyblade duties seriously, but Ryuko's heart was in the right place. Haagen had witnessed Ryuko helping the townspeople when she thought nobody was looking. Kohel swore - at least four times - she'd spent several hours destroying any monsters she found in the farthest alleys.

Beneath her tough façade, something undoubtedly created following the destruction of her world by that masked villain, was someone who valued her friends and family above all else!

That she would abandon her sister for some... some... some trivial reason was simply too incredulous to be true!

“I refuse to believe such nonsense!”

Clank!

His armor clanked louder than normal as he spun around, “She may be impulsive, but Ryuko wouldn’t abandon you! There has to be a good reason for this abhorrent behavior!”

“Ryuko needed to speak with Merlin concerning a promise made to a man by the name of Jecht.”

Clank!

“She spoke with Merlin!?”

Satsuki uncrossed her legs, eyes drifting towards the Scissor Blade, “Indeed. At least, that was her intention.”

“Hmm...”

That wasn’t the answer he expected.

But on the other hand, Ryuko was surprisingly intelligent for someone who normally allows emotion to dictate her actions. Humming in the back of his throat, Steiner turned bodily in the opposite direction and crossed his arms. While he didn’t approve of Ryuko’s decision to seek Merlin’s guidance, he understood why she might have gone to the wizard. Master Yen Sid was one of the wisest figures in the Realm of Light. His knowledge on a variety of subjects, light and darkness included, exceeded the imagination. Yet *his* master, the great Merlin, was even wiser.

“I certainly cannot fault Ryuko for seeking Merlin’s wisdom.”

Clank!

He smacked one hand against the other, "Nevertheless, when she arrives, I shall address this egregious display of poor judgement!"

"You have my thanks."

Relief, an emotion she'd all but forgotten until a few hours prior on a world across the vast expanse of the Realm of Light, coursed through Satsuki's heart. What more could she possibly state to Adelbert Steiner? Resting her head against the back of the chair, she glowered, brow furrowing from the slight displeasure remaining, "I could not be there for Ryuko when our world succumbed to darkness. For weeks, I believed she was lost. That I was the only survivor of that cataclysm. Yet you graciously allowed Ryuko into your home. You took her under your wing, provided food and shelter when you had no reason for doing so. You granted my sister some semblance of normalcy when she needed it most. That is a debt I shall never be able to repay."

"You mustn't thank me, Miss Satsuki!"

The floorboards creaked with each step. He understood why Satsuki was thanking him. But that didn't mean he could accept it, "Although I helped with her training, it was Beatrix who accepted Ryuko as her protégé. If you should thank anyone, it should be her, not me."

"Don't sell yourself short."

An ember spun out of the fireplace. It danced through the stifling atmosphere, white-hot ash turning to yellow then orange before fading beyond red. And watching said display, narrowed eyes tracking the haphazard motion until the end, Satsuki smirked, "Ryuko's always been stubborn. Some might say obstinate. She's never allowed anything to stand in her way. Those seeking her assistance. Friends and allies. Or even her own emotions. Whenever she puts her mind to something, there's little anyone can do to stop her. That was my expectation upon our reunion."

Her posture softened.

“But I couldn’t have been more wrong.”

Closing her eyes, she smirked, a relaxed, almost nostalgic admission, “While her heart remains clouded by darkness and pain, Ryuko has matured. She’s no longer the same person who constantly threw herself headfirst into danger. Perhaps you are correct. Perhaps Beatrix deserves credit. Denigrate yourself all you wish. But whatever you may choose to believe, Ryuko holds you in the highest regard.”

Clank!

Heavy plated armor shifted as Steiner cleared his throat.

“... despite her childish mannerisms, Ryuko’s heart has never strayed from the light.”

Perhaps the heat was beginning to take its toll. Standing this close to an open flame while wearing armor couldn’t be healthy. Not even for someone such as himself. But as much as he wanted to reject Satsuki’s compliment, Steiner found himself begrudgingly accepting the undeserving appreciation, “She’s stubborn. Inconsiderate. Her childishness mocks everything defining those worthy to bear the Keyblade. Yet when push comes to shove, Ryuko faces the darkness without faltering. In my humble opinion, Beatrix made the right choice accepting Ryuko as her apprentice.”

Several moments passed. Then a few more. But soon enough, his smirk shifted into an annoyed frown.

“However, if you tell her anything, I shall deny ever saying such!”

For once, she had nothing to say. It was a strange feeling. Knowing her sister had found refuge with such caring people lessened the guilt which had plagued her heart since she regained consciousness upon that unknown world. Relief swept throughout her body. The remaining tension in her muscles evaporated. A faint smile pulled at her lips. And yet, just as the peace and tranquility inside the Morning

Star Bar returned, it was promptly shattered when something *flew* overhead, followed in short succession by someone landing outside the pub.

“Huh? What are you guys doing here?”

The familiar voice instantly drew her attention.”

“Ryuko? What happened to -”

Before Weimar could finish, Ryuko cut him mid-question, “Did you forget to pay your freaking tab?”

“I paid that off last week!”

Breireicht sounded almost desperate for Ryuko *not* to say anything else. Even inside the pub, Satsuki and Steiner could sense his embarrassment, “But there’s something important! We found your sister! She’s inside with -”

“Yeah, I know,” Ryuko interrupted with a tone suggesting she was physically pushing the two knights out of her way, “So quit acting like stalkers and get out of my way!”

She stopped paying attention to their annoying excuses halfway to the pub. Geez, couldn’t they take the hint? And why the hell were they standing outside in the first place? Didn’t they have better things to do? Her grumbling must have worked, because as she propped her forearm against the door, Weimar and Breireicht finally stopped talking. Ignoring the sensation of something being *off* with the world, she sauntered into the Morning Star Pub, one hand instinctively waving at her sister.

“Sorry I’m late. Got a little caught up...”

As the door creaked on its hinges, sweeping a cloud of dust across the floor, Ryuko noticed Satsuki sitting next to the fireplace. Then

Steiner in front of her. In that order. And her mind skipped forward. So, *that's* why those guys were stalking outside, "Hey Rusty."

Bracing herself as Steiner's frustration just about reached critical mass, she covered her mouth and yawned, "Gotta admit. Didn't expect ya to be slacking off."

Clank!

"I am doing no such thing!"

The man literally jumped off the floor, which caused his armor to clack even more than usual. Some things never changed. So, jabbing both hands into her pockets as Steiner somehow kept his voice between an angry growl and frustrated shout, Ryuko patiently waited for him to wrap things up. Which, judging from the sweat pretty much pouring down his face, would be any second.

"... and you must think before you act!"

Shaking his fist at Ryuko, who he *knew* wasn't paying attention, Steiner raised his voice, "Who knows what might have happened while you sought Merlin's assistance!"

"You *really* think Satsuki needs me to babysit her?"

It took every ounce of self-respect not to roll her eyes at Steiner. And a quick glance at Satsuki, who had the look of 'I agree with everything you're saying but don't drag me into your petty argument' plastered all over her face, stopped her from saying anything she might regret when Beatrix found out she was back, "Alright! Alright! I'm sorry for not bringing Satsuki along for the ride. Anyway, where's Beatrix? There's something really important I gotta ask her."

"She's speaking with Master Eraqus."

Steiner couldn't help but notice the strange calmness radiating from Ryuko's heart. She behaved no differently than the last time they

spoke. And yet the change was noticeable. Perhaps her sister was correct that Ryuko matured. Perhaps her adventure across the Realm of Light afforded Ryuko much-needed perspective. He could not say. There were thousands of worlds scattered across the infinite void. But whatever the answer, the anger, frustration and darkness previously apparent had dissipated into smoldering embers, “She should return tomorrow morning. But if the matter is truly important, perhaps I can be of service.”

“Uh... yeah...”

She did *not* fidget. And anyone who claimed otherwise would get their front teeth knocked out, “You’ve been around forever, right? I mean... anyway, look. Do you know if Beatrix’s Keyblade ever transformed?”

“Transformed?”

Satsuki’s eyes narrowed at the seemingly innocuous question.

It might have been nothing more than exhaustion finally extracting its long-overdue tribute. Her confrontation with Vanitas had been strenuous. Perhaps she was overthinking Ryuko’s question. Yet something felt *wrong*. No, not wrong. Off, perhaps, better described the strange feeling growing inside her heart. And so, rising to her feet, chair angrily scrapping against the floor, she repeated the question, albeit in a slightly different manner, “What do you mean?”

“Well... look...”

Taking a deep breath, Ryuko reached into thin air, clenched her fingers, and manifested Threadcutter alongside an eruption of crimson stars.

Only a few hours ago, the Keyblade had possessed a deep, blood-red hue similar to both Scissor Blades. Black highlights had given additional depth to the razor-sharp winged protrusions spiraling from handle to blade. Swirling metal which had given Threadcutter an air

of menace and forceful stubbornness familiar to those who knew Ryuko. But now the Keyblade bore different colors. It had, in every definition of the word, and much to Satsuki's intimate awareness, *changed*.

Crimson had turned into bright, almost warming ruby. Black transformed into gold which seemingly shimmered in the orange-yellow light radiating from the crackling fireplace. Smooth and curving patterns bearing the slightest resemblance to a well-stitched quilt replaced razor-sharp wings. And the Keyblade itself, once slightly shorter than her Scissor Blade, was now several inches longer.

"Is that..."

"Yeah... but it doesn't *feel* any different," Ryuko hefted Threadcutter onto her shoulder, the newly-transfigured keychain, gold instead of the previous crimson, softly jingling, "It's still Threadcutter. But it doesn't feel the same. Crap, that doesn't make any sense, does it?"

"Hmm..."

Although his knowledge concerning the Keyblade was limited to second-hand experience, Steiner nevertheless found himself baffled. Could one's Keyblade change forms? He couldn't think of any reason why it shouldn't. Or should, for that matter. It had been more than a decade since Beatrix's Mark of Mastery, where she bested her master in single combat, and not once could he remember Save the Queen possessing any other appearance, "This is a perplexing matter..."

He scratched his chin thoughtfully, "But you needn't worry! I'm certain Beatrix knows about this unexpected development! Or perhaps Master Yen Sid! His knowledge is both extensive and detailed. That settles it! Once we return to the castle, I shall send a message right away!"

"Sounds good."

Threadcutter vanished as she rubbed her neck and yawned. Heading back to the castle sounded like a really good idea. Because she was freaking exhausted after one hell of a long and miserable day. Sure, Satsuki was back. And she released some tension kicking the living shit out of that asshole. But regeneration or healing or whatever, feeling half of her face getting blown away - then returning fiber by fiber - hurt like a *bitch*.

“Hey, Satsuki?”

The other half of the Scissor Blade slid silently into its scabbard as Satsuki followed Steiner and her sister, “Yes?”

“I’ve been thinkin’ about something...”

A thick eyebrow quirked at the admission. The cool breeze brushed against her face as they walked outside, insects chirping in the garden across the boulevard, “Does it have anything to do with your Keyblade.”

“Yeah... a little... I mean, something like that.”

Her fingers lacked any callouses despite literally *months* of swinging the Scissor Blade and Threadcutter. And she clenched them, knuckles bleeding white. The soft sound helped clear the confusion in her mind. It straightened her thoughts. And something whispered against her heart, “Once I find Mako... and I guess you find Gamagori and everyone else... what’s the plan?”

“To be perfectly honest, I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

Satsuki felt the corners of her mouth twisting downwards into a frown, “Our world is gone. Lost to the darkness. Nothing can bring it back. We must accept the possibility that some of our friends and allies didn’t survive. It might not be what you wish to hear... but the sooner you harden your heart to that possibility, the easier it will be to accept it.”

“Geez, what the hell’s wrong with you?”

Folding her hands against the nape of her neck, Ryuko sneered at Satsuki’s dark and depressing thoughts, “I was thinking of moving to Lindblum or something. And even if you’re right about that bullshit -”

Clank!

“Watch your language!”

Clank!

“... about that nonsense,” her eyebrow twitched before calming down, “Quit worrying! There’s no way to know that! But... ugh... ya just gotta trust your heart. I know it’s not something easy *for* you. But just this once, stopping thinking. Trust in your heart and nothing can go wrong.”

“You’re right.”

A gentle smirk played across Satsuki’s face as she tilted her head back, staring through gentle eyes at the countless stars twinkling in the darkened heavens, “We mustn’t let the prospect of failure deter us.”

“That’s more like it!”

Feeling another yawn forcing its way through her mouth, Ryuko stretched her arms. She didn’t know why Satsuki was bringing this up *now*. It wasn’t like she hadn’t thought about that dozens of times. But constantly thinking about it... worrying about it... wondering if Vanitas tortured Mako for the shits and giggles... wouldn’t help, “Now can you wait until tomorrow before laying on the guilt? It’s great that you’re back, but right now, I *just* want to crawl into bed and sleep for the next ten years.”

Chapter 8.6

October 23rd is Ryuko's birthday. So, as a present, here is the ending of Chapter 8. In retrospect, Xehanort was quite lucky in BBS that (1) there weren't any active Keyblade Masters besides Eraqus and (2) 99% of the characters couldn't tell he was evil until it was too late. If either one of those things changed, I think he would have had a lot more difficulty manipulating Terra. For example. Ryuko. She doesn't trust him. And she has experience dealing with people like him (i.e. Satsuki). Both of those things make her pretty much immune to his manipulations. And Beatrix? Let's just say she knows quite a bit about Xehanort.

There will be a one week time skip between the end of Chapter 8 and the beginning of Chapter 9.

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/7/7e/Sc00030.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/640?cb=20140315011404>]

"This is unbelievable."

For the first time in recent memory, Beatrix found herself teetering upon the verge of speechlessness, "We knew he had an apprentice, but still..."

Satsuki's eyes narrowed at the Keyblade Master's uncharacteristic response, "You were unaware?"

Leaves, colored yellow and orange by the approaching season, fluttered across the courtyard overlooking the moat. Flying overheard, soaring upon thermals of heat created in the final days of summer, birds flocked towards Alexandria Castle, their forms silhouetted against the sun. And standing in front of Ryuko and Satsuki, arms folded underneath her bosom while shifting most of her weight onto her back foot, Beatrix shook her head, "When a

master finds an apprentice, tradition dictates they inform their brethren.”

“And yet Xehanort didn’t say anything?”

Beatrix tapped her chin at the question. Annoyance thrummed through her heart, manifesting as the slightest narrowing of her remaining eye, “Five years ago, he informed Eraqus about a potential pupil. But we never saw the boy. And correspondence with Xehanort has always been discontinuous. We believed Ventus was his apprentice. But if what Xehanort confessed about Vanitas is the truth, it appears we were wrong.”

“What if you were half-right?”

From her perch on the stone wall next to Satsuki, an expression of annoyance and barely-repressed frustration in her eyes, Ryuko crossed her arms and scoffed, “Hear me out! Let’s say the guy wasn’t lying about Vanitas going batcrap crazy. And Terra was right about him being Ven’s older brother... twin... or whatever. Is there any chance Ven *and* Vanitas were both his students?”

“Hmm...”

As much as she disliked Ryuko’s almost instinctive vulgarity, Beatrix allowed the slight to pass. At least, for the moment. Not when there were more important things to consider.

Since the evening Xehanort surrendered an almost comatose Ventus into Eraqus’s care and protection, they’d been suspicious of *what* happened. The Keyblade he bore *proved* someone trained him. But with the boy’s inability to remember anything before regaining consciousness, something tied to the damage sustained by his heart, they had nothing tying his horrendous condition to Xehanort. And therein lied the problem with Ryuko’s question. Most of her brethren could barely afford the time and effort for a single apprentice. Eraqus being the singular exception.

If her student was correct, despite the difficulties... and how training multiple apprentices would interfere with his years-long research... Xehanort took both Ventus *and* Vanitas under his wing.

Whispers of the past brushed against her heart.

“... you may be right.”

A snort passed through Ryuko’s lips, “That means the bastard was lying, right?”

“Xehanort’s ambitions have always been... unorthodox,” Beatrix allowed her frustration to ebb into tranquil fury. She took a soft, careful breath, releasing the anger building inside her heart, “But aside from his *laissez faire* attitude towards darkness and those touched by it, he hasn’t done anything *technically* against our precepts.”

“Oh, c’mon!”

Uncrossing her legs, Ryuko slouched forward, both sneakers simultaneously hitting the ground with a solid *thump*, “Don’t tell me you’re buying his excuse!”

A single reddish-purple eye narrowed.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

The Keyblade Master threaded her fingers through her chestnut brown hair, pushing the voluminous bangs behind the eyepatch covering the right side of her face, “Xehanort is pragmatic and cunning. Fear does not dwell inside his heart. That he would *falter* at the last moment to strike down his apprentice is laughable.”

“Then we can draw but one conclusion.”

Satsuki understood one mustn’t judge a book by its cover. Since she hadn’t interacted with Xehanort, any judgement was instinctively rendered biased. As it should be. But she wasn’t naïve. Ryuko told

her enough... and Beatrix's reaction and subsequent response filled in the rest... to draw empirical conclusions about the Keyblade Master. No matter where she went or what world she visited, human nature never changed. And like the boulder standing against the relentless storm, her heart was tempered by years of experience dealing with individuals similar to Xehanort, "He's hiding something."

"I knew it!"

Ryuko's knuckles briefly stung as she punched the moss-covered stone next to her thigh, "I knew that bastard wasn't telling the truth! Who knows what else he lied about! Hell, I'd bet he's the one who unleashed Ardyn!"

"Do *not* throw around baseless accusations, Ryuko."

Instead of backing down or apologizing, she pushed head-first into her master's annoyance. Maybe it was her nerves. But after more than a month training underneath Beatrix, she had a pretty good grasp on when her master was annoyed, frustrated or simply trying to provoke a response. This was the first. Beatrix was *really* annoyed about something. Anyone with a brain could *feel* the anger, "Alright then, if Xehanort's completely innocent, who told Vanitas about Ardyn?"

And just like that, she turned the tables on the Keyblade Master.

"Yen Sid said Ardyn's prison was so secret he only knew where it was because Merlin gave him directions," she grumbled in the back of her throat, anger mixing with frustration, "And if a guy like him needed directions, how the hell did Vanitas know *exactly* where to go?"

"Do you have any evidence Xehanort freed Ardyn Lucis Caelum?"

The deafening silence from her apprentice said more than enough. She could tell Ryuko wished to answer. The subtle quivering of her fingers. How she bit her lower lip. The narrowing of her eyes. Beatrix

patiently allowed Ryuko the chance to speak her mind. And when her student restrained herself, continued, "You wish to blame him. I can understand that. Yet the one who brought darkness to your world was Vanitas. Not Xehanort."

"I know! But -"

"*But* make no mistake. I do not like this," Beatrix squared her shoulders, foreign worry dancing along the periphery of her heart, "Xehanort's inattentiveness, on its own, necessitates a very thorough investigation."

"The guy's still dirty as hell!"

Her master might be right about Xehanort, but Ryuko couldn't accept it! Hell, she refused to accept it! Even if there wasn't any evidence, she *knew* Xehanort was involved. Maybe she had been too pissed at the time, but now that her heart was clear, she remembered something suspicious about the way the old geezer talked. Whenever he spoke - or hell, whenever he *breathed* - it had sounded rehearsed. Almost like Xehanort had spent the last hour practicing in front of the mirror, "I say we track him down and get some damn answers!"

As Ryuko continued speaking her mind, Beatrix's mouth pursed into a tight grimace.

Loath as she was to admit anything, even when it came to Xehanort, there were simply too many inconsistencies in his story to ignore. To have not one, but two students. Brothers. One of whom he didn't inform anyone about. And then to have one of them succumb to darkness, attack the other nearly to the point of shattering his heart before embarking on a years-long rampage across the Realm of Light, Ardyn Izunia's freedom *and* the destruction of an entire world? And the other whose heart now contained nothing but pure light?

No... no, Xehanort couldn't be that stupid.

Why would he risk everything... his own life included... on the very real possibility someone discovered his plans?

The lack of an answer unsettled her heart far more than it should have.

“You will leave Xehanort to me.”

Beatrix’s voice hardened. Her tone grew cold, almost emotionless, as the slightest traces of anger engraved themselves upon both her face and heart, “For too long, we’ve tolerated his insatiable infatuation with darkness. But no more. That ends today. Wherever the truth may lie, Xehanort has confessed responsibility for Vanitas succumbing to darkness. And that, in itself, is inexcusable. Once the situation involving Ardyn Lucis Caelum is finished, whether he believes himself innocent, guilty or arrogantly naïve, he will address each and every one of my concerns.”

Something about what her master said made a lot of sense, “And what if he doesn’t come quietly?”

“An interesting question, Ryuko.”

The not-so-subtle threat lingered upon the early summer heat as the Keyblade Master’s lips curled into a mirthless smirk, “If Xehanort has truly fallen into darkness, I’m afraid the only recourse would be striking him down. It’s the only humane option, really.”

There it was.

If she wasn’t so annoyed, she probably would have chuckled.

Letting out a deep grumble, Ryuko surrendered to the normally inescapable pull of gravity. She slouched forward, head nearly reaching her chest. The crimson bang hovering above her left eye twitched. Her feathery hair, which had grown increasingly so over the last few days, gently swayed as she frowned. A few weeks ago - hell, last night - she would have wanted to kick Xehanort’s ass. But now

she was fine letting Beatrix take down the bastard. Maybe she was getting soft. Or maybe finding Satsuki calmed her down. But the frustration in her heart had cooled.

Not to mention she didn't want to stand *anywhere* close to Beatrix when the woman finally lost her temper.

"Ryuko..."

While her student's thoughts circled around the same topic, the Keyblade Master closed her eye. It was a brief respite. A moment to calm her quivering heart. And upon opening it once more, Beatrix shifted topics, addressing the *other* important matter, "Steiner told me about Threadcutter. Can you show me?"

"Oh... oh, right!"

It took Ryuko a moment to catch up. But when she did, she propped a hand against the fountain and leapt onto her feet. Both of her sneakers landed simultaneously, giving her the time to snap her wrist, Threadcutter materializing alongside an explosion of crimson stars, "You gonna tell me what happened?"

"As you already know, one's Keyblade is the manifestation of their heart."

Ruby light splashed between Beatrix's fingers as she lost herself in the intricate beauty behind Ryuko's Keyblade. Magic spun around her armored forearm. The streams of brilliant and soothing magical light wove complex patterns before her fingers curled, Save the Queen forming from the depths of her heart, "But such description only brushes against the surface of *what* the Keyblade represents. Throughout our lives, we connect with others. We make friends. And enemies. We fall in love or learn to hate. We suffer the anguish of losing those close to us. And the inexpressible relief knowing someone you love survived."

"Each of these experiences inexorably changes the heart."

With those words, Save the Queen shimmered in the sunlight. The crystalline keychain jingled as she held the Keyblade in front of Ryuko, the pearl-like light reflecting off the rose and silver Keyblade competing against Threadcutter's newfound radiance, "Sometimes we don't notice the difference. And other times... if the emotion resonates in a specific way... one's heart experiences substantial growth. They view the world with new perspective. They might find themselves seeking to protect... or destroy. And the Keyblade, which is nothing more than the physical embodiment of the heart, manifests this change."

Satsuki's eyebrows furrowed.

This was *more* detailed than Ryuko's explanation. And while she didn't fault her sister for forgetting otherwise unimportant details, it was enough to change her perspective. A weapon which evolved alongside its wielders? To the average mind, such a thing would sound ludicrous. But not to her. On the contrary, the concept of an emphatic blade resonated deep within her heart. For while the Keyblade was different from Kamui, there were similarities.

Yet she would never compare Senketsu with Threadcutter, no matter how much Ryuko's Keyblade resembled the former.

Her eyes narrowed, not from exasperation but curiosity, as her focus shifted between Ryuko and Beatrix's Keyblades, "If Ryuko's heart has changed, does that mean Threadcutter has grown stronger?"

"Not exactly."

Beatrix shook her head, "As the heart grows stronger, so does the Keyblade. Likewise, the opposite also holds true. Doubt and despair weaken one's resolve. Accepting darkness deadens the heart. They lose the ability to connect with others. And in time, that numbness spreads. Until, relentless as the changing tides, the Keyblade grows dull and rusted."

"I see..."

The answer faltered on her tongue. An uncharacteristic sense of uncertainty whispered against her heart. But even so, Satsuki remained resolute, “But there’s something you’re holding back, isn’t there?”

Like the last time Mako tackled her to the floor after she took the last mystery croquette, Ryuko pivoted an almost full one-eighty, “What?”

“Very observant.”

Not for the first time since introducing herself to Satsuki, the Keyblade Master found herself smirking, “I originally intended to render my final judgment once Ardyn Lucis Caelum no longer threatened the worlds.”

“Huh?”

Somewhere deep in her heart, in some unfathomable nightmarish place, unnerving voices whispered against Ryuko’s ears. That tone. She *knew* that tone of voice. The way Beatrix was smirking. The amused glint in her master’s eye. Almost immediately, painful memories surfaced in her mind. Moving slowly, she shifted her right foot backwards, Threadcutter subtly moving towards her stomach, “... what are you talking about?”

“You risked your life protecting Radiant Garden.”

Beatrix staggered her response as she swept a hand through her hair, Save the Queen dissipating within shimmering rose-colored shards of light, “A decision which saved thousands of innocents. Yet that alone wasn’t enough. It confessed your selflessness, but anyone can sacrifice themselves for the greater good. One doesn’t need a Keyblade for that. No, it was your willingness to help Eraqus’s pupils which settle the remaining doubt in my heart.”

“... huh?”

Again. Right there. For a moment, Ryuko felt that weird, really terrible vibe. Almost like someone was breathing against her neck, "... so? I mean, no offense, but Terra was acting like an idiot! He just needed someone to point out the obvious! I'm sure he would have eventually gotten his head on straight!"

"It can be difficult to speak the truth."

Beatrix's voice softened as she closed her eye, "There are times when lying seems easier. And there are times when the truth is necessary. The choice is never clear. Even for someone like myself. But you spoke your mind without regret. You told Terra not what he wanted to hear, but what he *needed* to hear."

All at once, everything suddenly fell into place.

And just like all those times Gamagori threatened expulsion for not knowing about some half-assed rule, Ryuko felt her eyebrow beginning to twitch.

"No! No way! I refuse!"

In a flash of crimson light, Threadcutter disappeared, leaving Ryuko free to angrily point at her master, "I already told you! I ain't interested! Not until Eraqus pulls his head out of his freaking ass!"

She heard a faint, annoyingly familiar chuckle. Almost as if Beatrix didn't hear anything she said. Or judging from the way her master was smirking, was purposely ignoring her, "These are troubling times, Ryuko. Enemies, ancient and recent, grow bold, striking at our borders. Despite our best efforts, darkness grows stronger. The light we hold dear is threatened. And so, through my prerogative as your master, I hereby determine that you've successfully demonstrated the true mark of a Keyblade Master."

"Hey! What did I just say!? I ain't gonna be master until -"

"I had the most interesting meeting with Eraqus..."

Taking several steps towards the castle, Beatrix stopped mid-stride, her head tilted slightly back, "He's exceptionally stubborn, Ryuko. Getting him to change his mind is more difficult than corralling a wild chocobo. And his aversion towards darkness is well-known. However, it appears Eraqus has somehow come to the realization his decision to fail Terra might have been somewhat hasty."

Ryuko was speechless.

Her eyebrow continued twitching as the Keyblade Master resumed her march towards the castle.

And with a seething snort, irritation giving way to normal levels of annoyance, she collapsed back onto the stone wall, one hand dragged down her face, "God damn it! She didn't even give me the freaking chance to talk back!"

"I suppose congratulations are in order."

Intimately aware of the tension electrifying the surrounding atmosphere, Satsuki smirked as she sat next to Ryuko, legs crossed one over the other, "Master Ryuko has quite the pleasant ring."

As much as she *hated* Satsuki knowing how to rub salt into her wounds, Ryuko almost decided to let the insult pass. After all, it had been forever since they talked. Sure, they said a lot of stuff on Radiant Garden. But Alexandria was different. They didn't need to worry about Vanitas. Or Ardyn deciding to pay a 'friendly' visit in the middle of the goddamn night. She could relax. Because having Satsuki back... not constantly worrying about her... made her heart feel lighter.

But old habits die hard.

And old habits interrupted by a masked psychopath weren't exactly easy to forget.

“You’re one to talk,” she could have said something worse. But knowing her luck, Steiner was hiding nearby, “And here I thought you’d shave off those caterpillars you call eyebrows.”

Satsuki didn’t so much as *blink* at the pathetic insult, “And yet, you, not I, have been burdened with a long-overdue promotion. I hope you’re not expecting me to bow down to you any time soon.”

Ryuko’s fingers twitched as, for a moment, she considered whacking Satsuki with Threadcutter.

“Go to hell.”

Chapter 9.1

Again, this is another scene I planned for some time. One of the biggest sources of conflict in Birth By Sleep was the inability for anyone to communicate. If Aqua had talked to Terra, he wouldn't have pushed her away. If Eraqus had explained to Terra why he feared the darkness perhaps telling in a roundabout way of another promising Keyblade wielder who fell to darkness, his student would have understood his reasons. In my story, it took Ryuko literally (or rather figuratively) beating the stupidity out of Terra for him to realize he was being a moron. Something like that had consequences. And I would also think most of Eraqus's more 'knight templar' behaviors (i.e. willing to kill Terra to get to Ventus) would be moderated by Beatrix's influence.

[img:

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Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 9 - Battle of the Four Heavenly Kings

An errant twitch of his jaw confessed the Keyblade Master's mounting frustration when Terra threw Ventus into the portal of light.

"Why must you act so foolishly?"

Eraqus's heart trembled at Terra's bewildering insubordination, "You've seen first-hand the aftermath of a world's destruction! Ryuko's heart remains forever scarred by that horrendous trauma! Ventus is a threat to everything we've sworn to protect!"

Despite speaking truthfully, his eldest apprentice's defiance only hardened in response. It infuriated him! Why were his words failing to reach Terra's heart? Surely, he could understand the bigger

picture? That there were greater things at risk than a single life? And yet, his hopes dwindled with every passing second. And a growing melancholy that tightened his grasp around his Keyblade, “Can’t you see what’s at stake? Would you inflict pain and suffering on countless innocents due to nothing more than misguided naivety?”

“That doesn’t make any sense!”

Terra couldn’t understand why his master was doing this. When Master Xehanort warned him about Ven learning the truth about Vanitas, he’d rushed home. For their master to not say anything about his brother? Hell, he’d be mad too. He didn’t know anything about an X-Blade. But for their master to try and kill Ven? Swallowing the bile in the back of his throat, he shouted, “You want to kill Ven because you’re afraid of him? Afraid of something he *might* do?”

“NO!”

In the distance, birds fled their roosts. Terra’s eyes widened at the unexpected outburst. And Eraqus, shame engraving itself upon his scarred visage, glanced away, unable to look at his pupil, “No... no, Terra. You’re all... I think of you... all of you... I am *proud* of what you’ve become. But I swore an oath to protect the worlds. To strike down those seeking to extinguish the light. No matter how much it pains me, my duties come first and foremost.”

“Which is why I’m begging you to *please* stand aside.”

An explosion of light caused Terra to involuntarily tense, Keyblade at the ready. And once it dimmed, his heart sunk at the yellow-white aura surrounding his master, “The threat posed by the X-Blade cannot be understated! Its creation would herald the destruction of everything!”

Regret, concealed underneath hardened emotions, caused Eraqus’s tone to briefly waver, “If Ventus must die to save countless innocents, that is a burden I’m willing to bear!”

“... master, do you remember the day you took me under your wing?”

A soft wind, almost ephemeral, whispered across the courtyard. It carried a hint of the approaching autumn. A breeze almost too somber. And Terra, feeling the emotional pain stemming from confronting his master, bit the inside of his cheek for clarity. He knew what might happen if he was wrong. But even so, with only the slightest hesitation in his heart, he dismissed Earthshaker, “I was excited. I mean, who could have imagined? Me, just another kid from Lindblum, asked to learn from a Keyblade Master? It felt like a dream come true.”

There was a moment's pause.

Terra chuckled, a solemn laugh lacking any real warmth, “You told me something that day. Something I'll never forget. You said, ‘one must always strive to do their best to protect the light from darkness. But one must always remain true to their heart, no matter what.’”

“Yes...”

It was subtle, but Eraqus found himself lowering his Keyblade with every piercing memory, “... I remember.”

“I've spoken with those who believe darkness is the source of true power. They were certainly strong. And sometimes, I struggled to win. But that couldn't be further from the truth.”

Pressing his hand over his heart, Terra approached his master, an almost pleading look in his eyes, “That's why, even if I've accepted the darkness as part of myself, I'm going to use it to protect my friends! To stop monsters like Vanitas and Ardyn Izunia! You may be my master, but I'll do everything in my power to save Ven! He shouldn't pay for what his brother's trying to do!”

“What?”

Something caught in the back of Eraqus's throat, "His brother?"

"Master Xehanort explained everything."

A disturbed shudder raced down the Keyblade Master's spine while Terra swept an arm lengthwise through the air, "Vanitas is trying to recreate something called the X-Blade. And to do that, he needs Ven for some reason. That's why Ven doesn't remember anything! That's why Master Xehanort brought him to you! He was trying to protect Ven! He wouldn't want you to kill him! If we can just stop Vanitas... you won't need to do any of this!"

"Xehanort..."

Eraqus felt his hands beginning to tremble. An uncharacteristic convulsion. Not from shock or surprise. But unadulterated fury, "I should have known! How could I have been so blind?"

The unexpected response threw Terra through a loop, "... master?"

Air hissed between the Keyblade Master's clenched teeth as the intense light radiating from his heart dissipated into motes of magic. And yet his frustration only grew, "Xehanort used your desperation to further his own agenda! He played on your emotions! And he used my aversion towards darkness to push you away from the light! He sent you here... he sent Ventus here! All of this... everything that's happened... was part of his plan!"

"Master Xehanort wouldn't... no, he couldn't..."

Terra shook his head, refusing to believe what his master was implying. Why would Master Xehanort do such a thing? It didn't make any sense. But he stopped thinking when something whispered against his heart. A familiar power he'd only recently accepted as part of his himself. It was enough for him to shout at the top of his lungs.

"Look out!"

Eraqus hadn't needed his pupil's warning. But it was still immeasurably helpful.

Masonry crunched underneath his boots as he shifted his center of balance. Crossing one foot behind the other, Keyblade slicing upwards from hip to shoulder, the aura of light signifying the strength and conviction dwelling inside his heart crackled to life once more. Magic and wind rushed across the courtyard. His haori and hair rustled as he countered the writhing ball of burning darkness. The horrendous attack clashed against the razor-sharp edge of his Keyblade. The ethereal surface seemingly buckled, straining itself to overcome his defenses. And just as quickly, without the slightest effort, he shattered the abhorrent technique.

"Xehanort!"

Not a trace of warmth remained in the Keyblade Master's heart as he glared at the figure standing atop the stairs, "You DARE show yourself here?"

"Hmm... figured everything out, have you?"

With a confident smirk, Xehanort lowered his hand, darkness still crackling between the gloved digits, "Am I to presume Beatrix's investigation led you to such a conclusion?"

"M-Master Xehanort?"

An unexpected gasp escaped Terra's throat as he stared at the wizened master, "Why are you -"

"What are you waiting for, Master Terra?"

The crinkling of his gloves accentuated the false urgency in the wizened master's voice. Holding out his hand, he returned Eraqus's passionate and hate-filled glare with subtle amusement and mirth, "Do you believe Eraqus will be swayed by mere words? Moments ago, he attempted to kill your friend! To him, even the slightest traces

of darkness must be wiped from the face of existence! If you do not stop him now, he won't rest until Ventus is no more!"

"Enough!"

To the well-trained eye, there was the slightest of openings in Xehanort's defense. Due to the fallen master's advanced age, undoubtedly influenced by his capricious and arrogant usage of darkness, his joints were wracked by arthritis. He could no longer maneuver with the same mobility, speed and reflexes which had once rendered him among their most powerful.

And Eraqus immediately used that knowledge to his advantage.

Flexing his knees, one foot sliding backwards an inch, he scoffed. Master's Defender's keychain jingled. And without the slightest trace of sympathy, he rushed up the stairs. After only a few bounds, skipping several steps at a time, he leapt over his treacherous friend. Using the light dwelling inside his heart, he immediately teleported behind Xehanort, taking advantage of the man's weakened condition. Fury shimmered in the depths of his narrowed eyes. His lips were pulled into an infuriated snarl, displaying his *hatred* for someone he once believed was his best friend.

Clang!

Arcs of light and darkness crackled between their respective Keyblades when Xehanort pivoted faster than expected, No Name materializing within greyish-black flames. The competing primordial forces emitted waves of crackling energy. His muscles quivered. His jaw clenched when Xehanort's darkness exploded into reality alongside the man's infuriating grin. And with an infuriated grunt, one born from betrayal and treachery he pulled upon the light inside his heart, once more coating Master's Defender with its brilliance.

Yet even *that* wasn't enough to overpower his fallen colleague.

Another snarl passed through his clenched teeth.

Xehanort chuckled.

And in the blink of an eye, they simultaneously teleported, leaving behind wisps of dissipating darkness and light.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Terra's teeth ground together as he watched his master fight Xehanort. Earthshaker trembled from the impotent rage circulating throughout his heart as magic influenced by light fought spells infused with darkness. The sound of their respective Keyblade echoed across the courtyard, each impact creating gusts of pressurized wind. But he saw everything. Despite using the power of light, his master wasn't winning.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Barely touching the ground before taking another leap backwards, the corners of Eraqus's face twisted into a snarl as light exploded from his heart, "Let the darkness die!"

As his former friend - no, as an enemy of the Realm of Light - landed across the courtyard, he spun his Keyblade, eight swords of light manifesting into existence, "Kasumi!"

Spiraling through the air, twisting and dancing around each other, the light-based projectiles launched themselves towards his adversary. The first four missed, avoided when Xehanort's nimbleness proved too great. The next three shattered against the man's Keyblade. But the final one sliced through Xehanort's right shoulder. It drew forth blood as the treacherous man stumbled backwards, No Name clattering to the ground.

"Your ambitions end here, Xehanort!"

A grunt escaped his throat when the fallen Keyblade Master teleported out of harm's way at the very last second. Snarling viciously under his breath before yanking Master's Defender out of

the ground, Eraqus furiously seethed, "The X-Blade shall never return!"

"Ah, is that right?"

Despite the appreciable pain, something he hadn't felt in quite a long time, Xehanort forced out a laugh. He was impressed. Even after all this time, Eraqus hadn't lost his touch. Perhaps it was Beatrix's influence which prevented his old friend's skills from rusting. The wound on his shoulder was severe. His fingers were already going numb. The weight of his deadened arm threw off his balance. But with nothing more than the briefest application of restoration magic, emerald light surrounded his body, stitching the wound closed, "Perhaps you should wait until I've taken my final breath before celebrating."

The man's confidence bewildered Eraqus.

And then he stumbled, nearly losing his balance.

"What?"

Around them, seemingly without origin, the world began trembling. The chains connected to the castle quivered, clanking metal grinding against each other. Shooting a hate-filled glare at Xehanort, Eraqus's heart sank into the pit of his stomach when a massive cloud of darkness manifested out of the spaces between worlds. Lightning crackled around it. The darkness-infused magic struck at the ground. And seconds later, as the cloud dissipated, his eyes widened at the enormous, monstrous Heartless perched upon the castle. Clawed fingers gripped the stone edifice, leaving behind large scratches in their wake. Liquid darkness oozed down green flesh. A heart-shaped hole stood prominent between right amber eyes framed by what resembled hair-like tentacles.

He could almost *hear* its malevolence.

Almost by instinct, as if his heart fathomed some incomprehensible truth, Eraqus stepped backwards, "Xehanort, what have you done?"

"I had planned on waiting until Terra weakened you."

For perhaps a moment longer than necessary, the wizened master mulled his old friend's genuine horror upon standing before something that had been spoke about in legend. A creature destined to arise whenever the balance between light and darkness favored one over the other. And with a pleasant grin, one unbefitting the situation, he clasped both hands against the small of his back, "But alas, it appears Ryuko's influence remains abnormally strong."

The strangeness of the confession snapped Terra out of his shock, "Ryuko?"

"Yes... the girl... she's quite special..."

Perturbed as he was by Ryuko somehow bolstering Terra's resolve, Xehanort couldn't help but chuckle. Although barely a week had passed, he remembered the eldritch crimson glow pouring from her body. He'd never felt anything quite like it. Even now, his heart ached to witness it once more. During those seconds which had been too brief, as the normally lethal injury vanished before his eyes, something *e/se* had touched his heart. An overbearing light that cast an unsettling shadow. And alongside it? Darkness greater than Terra's that shimmered with uncharacteristic, unnatural radiance.

The girl's very existence defied everything he knew!

"You might say I'm rather curious about her..."

As he spoke those specific words, an unnerving hum filled the world. Still perched upon the castle, the massive Heartless leaned forward, hands cupped around its open mouth. Darkness streamed out of nothingness. Before their eyes, it warped and twisted into a glowing sphere of sickly green and purple destruction.

Something growing denser by the second.

"... but there will be more than enough time to contemplate such things later."

That comment... the offhanded lack of empathy... was the final straw for Eraqus.

"XEHANORT! HAVE YOU GONE COMPLETELY INSANE!?"

"All things are born from darkness. And thus, all things must return to it. The heart. The worlds. Even existence itself!"

The treacherous Keyblade Master remained undaunted by such pathetic words as he clenched his fists, gloves crackling alongside the building energy, "Is it insane to wish nothing more than to witness that which begot everything?"

Eraqus couldn't stand listening to another word spewing from Xehanort's mouth! The man had truly lost his mind! To not only seek the X-Blade but release something as dangerous as the Cloud of Darkness? His shoulders stiffened. His Keyblade trembled from the anger coursing through his furious heart. But something stayed his hand. An inkling that whispered in his ear. Something wasn't right. Xehanort had never been one to gloat. Not unless victory was assured. So then, why was the man smirking? Surely, Xehanort didn't think the Heartless would be capable of hitting him?

A moment passed.

Then, alongside a sharp gasp, his eyes widened.

And Xehanort's smirk broadened.

The passage of time slowed to a crawl as an orange light enveloped the Keyblade Master. Moving quicker than normally possible, he turned around, sprinting towards his student, who had yet to realize the true depths of Xehanort's malevolence. As the drawn-out unholy

roar resonated with his heart, sending shockwaves rippling across the world, Eraqus ignored the rapidly approaching beam of darkness. Instead, he focused on Terra. He saw the boy's eyes widen. He sensed the fear of death growing in his heart. And with one final step, the technique milliseconds from reaching them, he shoved his eldest apprentice out of the way.

“MASTER!!!”

Terra screamed at the top of his lungs as his master... the man he considered more of a father than anything... disappeared within the beam of darkness *puncturing* the world.

And just as quickly, little more than a few heartbeats later, it was over.

“N-No...”

His heart sank as the smoke cleared, leaving behind wisps of burning darkness. A cold numbness spread through his limbs as the obvious became apparent. His master was gone. There was nothing left. Nothing but his master's Keyblade, scorched but miraculously undamaged by something which destroyed one of the mountains in front of the castle.

It was almost taunting him.

“No! No! NO!!!”

He took a step, almost stumbling, before picking himself back up, “This can't be happening! Master Eraqus... you can't be dead!”

“You know, at times I find your progress quite striking.”

With nothing more than *intent*, the Cloud of Darkness returned to the darkness from whence it came. Slowly descending the stairs, taking them one at a time, Xehanort casually unfolded his arms, “But you still fall short. You refuse to fully accept darkness into your heart.

Because if you had, your beloved master wouldn't have needed to sacrifice his life to save yours."

"You bastard!"

Something inside Terra's heart *snapped*, "I'll kill you!"

"That's it!"

Xehanort jovially laughed as he dodged the feckless youth's attacks, "Let out that anger, my boy! Give yourself over to the darkness!"

The fury running through his veins was sickening. He could feel the darkness calling him. And for a moment, Terra almost fully accepted the darkness into his heart. If using that tainted power meant getting justice, he'd gladly take that option, "You're going to pay!"

"That's right! But not here. Not now."

Stepping one foot over the other, effortlessly avoiding Terra's attacks, the fallen master teleported up the stairs, once more placing distance between himself and the boy. Manic amber eyes widening, he smirked at the youth's anger before raising No Name above his head. And with callous disregard for the blasphemy he was about to commit, fired a beam of darkness skyward.

Within moments, long enough for Terra to realize the ground was shifting underneath his feet, the realm descended into a turbulent maelstrom of darkness and tragedy. Thick clouds all but plotted out the sun, transforming the evening into a menacing overcast. Distant mountains crumbled into nothing while others obtained new height. A bitter wind howled throughout the courtyard. The chains connected to the castle shook before breaking one by one. And above them, floating over the castle while the courtyard began slowly breaking apart underneath their feet, was a massive sphere of glowing darkness.

"What have you done?"

The fallen master grinned at the obvious question, "If you desire revenge, come to the place where all Keyblade wielders leave their marks upon fate!"

A Corridor of Darkness sprung out of the ground, writhing and oozing as Xehanort stepped into its embrace, "There... and only there... shall you find the justice your heart desires!"

Last edited: Oct 28, 2018

Chapter 9.2

Here you go. This scene takes place roughly... I'd say... an hour after the first part of the chapter. Long enough for Ven and Aqua to visit the Destiny Islands. And for Aqua to visit Yen Sid, which might be interesting. Still, the point of a crossover is that some things change while others stay the same. For example, Terra could have spoken with Jecht in this story upon reaching the Destiny Islands. The guy could have given Terra a 'heart to heart' chat. As for Yen Sid? Beatrix likely explained everything to him in my story, he might possibly have warned Aqua and Mickey about the true depths of Xehanort's madness. Knowledge that arose thanks, in large part, to Ryuko. The majority of Xehanort's plans hinged upon people not know what he was doing until it was too late to stop him. Not to say he can't plan on the fly. Or anticipated some measure of chaos. But if he manages to emerge from BBS close to what happened in canon, you can't deny that he worked REALLY hard for that victory.

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/f/f4/Sc00049.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140315012130>]

Something wasn't right.

A moth fluttered in front of Ryuko's eyes, briefly landed on her nose, before fleeing when she tried smacking it. With the sun setting over the Aerbs Mountains, the peaceful skies were engulfed in slowly darkening colors. The familiar combination of salt water and mist filled her lungs. The wind blowing across the grassy plains outside Alexandria rustled her feathery hair. One by one, in front of her unfocused eyes, stars of many colors began filling the heavens. Thousands upon thousands of pinpricks of light, each another world or someone really important.

And laying on the damp grass, several blades pricking at the back of her neck, she cursed underneath her breath.

“Damn it...”

She didn't know what it was. Or hell, whether she was sensing *anything*. It could have been nothing more than anger from realizing Xehanort had been pulling the strings since the day the masked bastard attacked her and Mako. But after coming this goddamn far... dealing with more than her fair share of shit... she knew better than to ignore her heart. As much as she wanted to sit back, relax and leave Xehanort's long-overdue ass kicking to Beatrix, there was a strange itch in the back of her mind.

It, quite frankly, was starting to piss her off.

“Something wrong?”

She initially tried ignoring the question. But when that didn't work - or rather, Satsuki repeated the question in a tone that suggested *not* saying anything wasn't the best choice - Ryuko tilted her head backwards, eyes slightly narrowing, “Just a bad feeling, is all.”

“A bad feeling?”

Her eyebrow twitched at how Satsuki managed to sound high-and-mighty, like she was better than everyone, while being genuinely concerned, “Like something really awful and terrible is going down.”

“What do you mean?”

Grumbling out of the side of her mouth, Ryuko lurched upwards, absentmindedly brushing a strand of feathery hair out of her eyes. Shit, what the hell was up with her hair? She couldn't remember the last time it was this damn messy, “Remember when you first put on Junketsu?”

The question, or something about it, must have shocked Satsuki. Her sister was never this speechless after a question. And for good reason. Because from what she knew about the other Kamui, including all the unnecessary details, Junketsu had made Senketsu's

attempt at forcing her to wear him look downright tame, “That night I felt like something bad was going to happen. Senketsu got goosebumps and I couldn’t sleep. This feeling’s like that... but ten times worse.”

“I see.”

As her mind processed the answer, Satsuki’s expression hardened. Realization as to the underlying meaning quickly engraved itself onto her heart. Turning aside, she stared across the grassy fields, gaze focused upon the last vestiges of sunlight reflected against Alexandria Castle’s crystalline spire, “Are you absolutely certain of this?”

“I’m damn sure.”

Tapered, not thick, eyebrows furrowed at the confession. Calloused fingers bereft of anything to hold momentarily clenched. But just as quickly, the frustration diminished, replaced by tranquil acceptance. Breathing through her nose as she rose to her feet, heeled boots sinking into the grass, Satsuki turned aside, steeled heart preparing itself for what was to come, “If this unknown threat is as dangerous as you believe, we should inform Beatrix and Steiner at once.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s just...”

Ryuko purposely trailed off, thoughts swirling around inside her head as she stared at the thousands of stars twinkling overhead. She knew Satsuki was right. Telling Beatrix and Steiner would make everything much simpler. And yet, for some reason, something was holding her back. She wanted more than a freaking vague feeling! A name or something.

But she stopped herself short.

“... never mind, let’s get moving.”

In the span of a second, several emotions passed through her heart. Anger. Frustration. Embarrassment. And acceptance. In that order. Propping a hand against the grass, she leapt onto her feet. Why the hell was she yelling at herself? It wasn't like she did anything *wrong*. In fact, waiting until she understood the problem was quite possibly one of the smartest decisions she could have made. Sure, fighting by the seat of her pants worked really well back home... and several times since then... but something about this particular problem required a little more caution.

"I bet they probably already know all about it."

Yawning loudly, she rubbed the spot between her shoulder and neck, massaging out the minor but annoyance cramp, "Yen Sid can peep across the freaking universe with magic! Beatrix probably left hours ago to deal with -"

A deafening roar cut her off mid-sentence.

Eyebrows furrowing into an irritated glower, Ryuko slowly tilted her head backwards. She stabbed her hands into her jacket when Beatrix flew into view. Her eyes narrowed, lips pursed together, as her former master circled above them, trails of pink light following in her glider's wake. To the average person - hell, to most people, including Steiner - Beatrix's Keyblade Armor was badass. The gold and crimson magical armor hugging every curve while being impervious to darkness *did* give off a 'screw with me and I'll kick your ass before you realize what happened' feeling.

But she knew something was wrong.

"Save the speech..."

As her master vaulted off her Keyblade glider, Save the Queen reappearing in her fingers before her boots even touched the grass, Ryuko scoffed, "... I already know about it."

"You do?"

Beatrix was not someone easily surprised by unexpected developments.

But her former student's direct bluntness caught her off-guard.

It was thanks to her armor did the appreciable widening of her remaining eye go unnoticed. As well as the slight parting of her lips. But the subtle tensing of her shoulders, the surprise accompanying the otherwise unimportant two words, must have confessed more than she wished. How could Ryuko have already known when she, her master, only learned of the threat minutes ago? And Yen Sid and Merlin discovered it minutes before *that*. But the thought of *asking* her student never crossed her mind. As interesting as it was, Beatrix didn't truly care about the answer.

Or, at the very least, asking Ryuko could wait until the threat had been neutralized.

"Then you know what we're facing."

Save the Queen quivered. A slight, otherwise imperceptible motion. The barest admission of the turbulence wracking her serene thoughts, "A terrible darkness has forced itself into the Realm of Light - the Cloud of Darkness."

Satsuki's eyes widened but it was Ryuko who gave voice to their collective confusion.

"The Cloud of Darkness?"

"A Heartless significantly stronger than the Hunter of the Dark you defeated in Gizamaluke's Grotto," Beatrix's heart, hardened by years of experience confronting darkness and those seeking dominion over its corruptive power, sank to the pit of her stomach. Emotions long since mastered threatened to break free. Caressing her chin, she turned away, worry concealed by the opaque visor, "Something I had believed nothing more than legend..."

“All legends have some basis in reality.”

Satsuki glanced away from the Keyblade Master. Steel-blue eyes swept towards her sister. And in that brief moment, as they locked eyes, more than enough was said. Beatrix wouldn't understand. She couldn't understand given her sister's adamant refusal to talk about their world, the events which transpired less than a year prior *and* the threat which had barely been prevented from expanding across the worlds like a diaspora. But the Cloud of Darkness brought to mind another monster. One whose objective had been domination over existence.

“Heartless instinctively seek hearts. They are drawn towards those who wield the Keyblade. And those who've given themselves over to darkness. If given the opportunity, they won't hesitate to consume the hearts of worlds.”

She punctuated the final declaration with a slight furrowing of her eyebrows. At her side, Ryuko tensed, confessing an unconscious revulsion at the nightmarish reminder, “Even bearing such prestige, I doubt the Cloud of Darkness is different. Which begs the obvious question.”

Clack!

With a reflexive *snap*, her heeled boot sunk into the damp soil, “Which world is the Cloud of Darkness targeting?”

A shake of the master's head was the only answer.

“Yen Sid has sought counsel with the stars, but something clouds his vision.”

There truly weren't any limits to magic. Through nothing more than one's imagination, the impossible was achievable. Even her prodigious magical abilities paled in comparison with the students of Merlin. What she could achieve only in her dreams, Yen Sid and Lulu were capable of casting without a single word. Which made the

prospect of something managing to blind the former's vision all the worse, "Yet he was able to discover something. The Cloud of Darkness's presence has influenced the balance between light and darkness. With every second it roams freely, more and more Heartless follow in its wake. A tidal wave of darkness that, if not stopped, threatens to engulf the worlds."

"Then what the hell are we waiting for!?"

Threadcutter appeared alongside an eruption of crimson stars.

As much as she *tried* forgetting, Ryuko could still remember every second of that stormy night. The pouring rain trickling down her face. Vanitas's insane laughter as he pulled out his Keyblade. Fighting tooth and nail against the Unversed. The searing pain of getting blasted face-first with darkness. The masked bastard mocking their efforts as darkness exploded out of their world's Keyhole, engulfing everything she'd almost sacrificed her life to protect from Ragyo Kiryuin and the Life Fibers. Merely thinking about that night caused a cold sweat to ripple down her spine.

No matter what it took, she wouldn't let that happen to anyone else!

"Let's go kick that thing's ass!"

"No."

The *coldness* in her former master's voice caught Ryuko completely off-guard.

"Say what!?"

"I know why you *both* wish to confront the Cloud of Darkness," with a single step, Beatrix interrupted her former student's protests. She couldn't blame Ryuko. If their positions were reversed, she would have responded the same way, "Your heart is strong, Ryuko. What you've accomplished has benefited countless worlds. But though you've achieved the laudable rank of master, you are still my

student. And as such, you follow my orders. My *final* order as your master.”

Ryuko balled her hand into a fist.

And then, just as quickly, the anger left her heart.

“Alright.”

She couldn’t believe what Beatrix was saying. It didn’t make any sense! But arguing with her master wouldn’t solve anything. She was stubborn. But Beatrix was like a freaking boulder when it was convenient, “What do you want me to do?”

The ease in which her former apprentice, normally stubborn to a fault, accepted her decision wasn’t surprise. What was shocking, on the other hand, was the look shared between Ryuko and Satsuki. Something that confessed a measure of familiarity, “While I convene with Yen Sid and the other masters, you will go to the Land of Departure. I’ve been unable to contact Eraqus since earlier this afternoon. And Yen Sid cannot reach him through magic.”

“You want me to check on the guy?”

A gust of wind brushed against Ryuko’s face. Right before she promptly snapped, “Why can’t you? Or better yet, why can’t Yen Sid or Merlin? They can teleport!”

“The Land of Departure is warded against such measures.”

Beatrix shook her head, the motion causing her armor to clack as magical plates slid against each other, “If I were to leave Alexandria, it would take at least twenty minutes to approach the world. But without the use of magic, the only other method involves a Star Shard. But it appears Yen Sid allowed his apprentice to abscond with his shard. An unanticipated breach of protocol from the man. And Merlin, through your report, granted his own shard to Auron.”

“Which leaves only mine...”

The familiar weight, ephemeral yet possessing something akin to physical mass, of the Star Shard resting inside her pocket did little to assuage the concern Satsuki felt coursing through her heart, “If you wish to borrow my Star Shard, all you had to do was ask.”

“Under normal circumstances, I would have accepted such an offer.”

With the sole of her boots depressing the grass around them, Beatrix turned around, allowing the weight of her words to sink into Ryuko and Satsuki’s minds, “But given the immediate threat posed by the Cloud of Darkness... and my required presence at the front lines... there’s no one more qualified at convincing Eraqus than Ryuko.”

Ryuko’s eyes briefly unfocused, “Huh?”

Clank!

“Allow me to be perfectly blunt. I do not care *how* you accomplish my orders.”

Each step was punctuated by the rhythmic, almost menacing, clanking of the Keyblade Master’s armor. The setting sun reflected off the polished surface, scattering pink and gold across the grassy field, “Speak with him. Convince him. Trick him. Force him, if physical confrontation becomes necessary. Eraqus believes his duties as steward of the Land of Departure are sacrosanct. And he would be correct. It is forbidden by our precepts for the steward to leave the world. Attempting to do so, for whatever reason, elicits the harshest of punishments.”

Ryuko blinked.

And her lips curled into a cold smirk, “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you’re telling me to break the rules.”

Clank!

“Hmm... when did I say such a thing?”

Beatrix took another cautious yet measured step before stopping, an unnoticeable smile gracing her features, “Unless I’m mistaken, *you* aren’t the steward, Ryuko. Therefore, you aren’t breaking any precepts. You’re simply convincing Eraqus the Cloud of Darkness poses more of an immediate threat. Am I making myself perfectly clear?”

“Yeah... yeah... I get it.”

As much as she didn’t like it, Ryuko understood what her master was pulling. It was underhanded. Deceptive. Something she would do but way out of line for the woman who punished even the slightest breaking of the rules. Which meant the situation - hell, everything - was getting worse by the freaking minute, “I’ll kick the guy’s ass into gear for you.”

Grumbling out the side of her mouth, she dismissed Threadcutter before crossing her arms, fingers angrily strumming against the armor covering her forearm when Beatrix didn’t stop looking at her, “Alright! Fine! And I won’t go after the goddamn Cloud of Darkness! Happy now?”

“Hmm...”

The armored Keyblade Master’s laughter, soft yet melancholic, drained the anger from Ryuko’s heart. It left her standing alone and confused. She knew Beatrix wasn’t buying her dumb promise. Hell, not even Mako would believe she wouldn’t go after the Cloud of Darkness. But instead of saying anything, or even looking the other way, her former master just opened her fingers, Save the Queen transforming halfway to the ground alongside an explosion of brilliant pink and gold light.

“... be careful, Ryuko.”

“Enough already!”

Ryuko could *feel* Satsuki's withering gaze. A normal person would have flinched. But her? It only made her angrier, "I know you're worried about me! But if there's anyone qualified to kick that freaking Heartless's ass, it's you!"

A faint chuckle was the master's response as her boot touched the glider. A moment's respite for their hearts to connect before she threw her weight sideways, vaulting herself onto the transformed Keyblade. As the humming rose-pink energy pulsed beneath the glider, emitting soothing waves of light that stroking the surrounding grass, Beatrix leaned forward, fingers grasping the vehicle's concave handles.

"May your heart be your guiding key."

Ryuko had stopped paying attention.

Not because of the energy rushing across the field or the slight muffle caused by her armor. It wasn't either of those things. But as Beatrix spun in a tight circle before disappearing into the darkening skies, one final explosion of pink and gold light heralding her departure to the Lanes Between, she clenched her trembling fingers. Yet despite her efforts, no matter how hard she tried, she stared at the ground, unable to watch her master leave.

"I know what you're gonna say."

She bit her lower lip, the taste of copper filling her mouth, "Yeah, going against something that goddamn powerful is fucking stupid. It ain't Ragyo Kiryuin. I don't have Senketsu. And even with the Keyblade, there's no guarantee I'll do anything more than piss it off."

Her sneakers slid against the grass as she spun around, bringing her face-to-face with Satsuki, "But that hasn't stopped me before! And it won't stop me now! I WON'T let that Heartless destroy any worlds! So, if you got something to say, save it! Because it ain't gonna change my mind!"

“I know.”

Perhaps it was the follies of her heart. Or maybe the emotions once buried underneath conviction and determination had sprung forth, taking advantage of her newfound happiness. The reason didn't matter. And even if it did, Satsuki couldn't find the desire to care. For as much as she believed Ryuko's strategy was the height of foolishness, she knew, perhaps better than anyone, her sister wasn't easily deterred. No amount of wordplay, threats or violence could breach the stubborn fortress that was Ryuko's heart.

While the Cloud of Darkness was an exceptionally dangerous threat, perhaps greater than Ardyn Izunia's revenge or Xehanort's subtle machinations, they had faced worse odds. Fought against monsters beyond understanding, whose victory had been all but assured.

And prevailed nonetheless.

“Which is why we should leave at once.”

A smirk pulled upon her lips at Ryuko's astonished expression. It was truly pitiful. After everything that transpired upon their world, losing everything despite standing victorious above their monstrous adversary, that her sister believed, even if only subconsciously, such foolishness was insulting. The notion plucked at her heart. And with that, nothing more than another thought, her expression reversed itself, twisting into a stern, almost lecturing glower.

Right before she extended her hand towards Ryuko.

“The sooner we depart, the faster you can confront the Cloud of Darkness.”

An eyebrow quirked at her sister's hesitation. Or rather, what she assumed was hesitance, “Is that not what you wanted?”

“Tch! You always know exactly what to say, don't ya?”

Ryuko snorted, refusing to look Satsuki in the eye. She wouldn't give her sister the satisfaction of being right. Because only a bitch like Satsuki Kiryuin would string her along until the last freaking moment. And yet, she found herself smirking, "So, do what you gotta do."

All but rolling her eyes, she slapped her hand against Satsuki's, "Activate the Star Shard or whatever! C'mon! We ain't got all day!"

"Since I've never spoken with Eraqus, nor been to the Land of Departure, I'll be relying upon your heart for guidance."

Each word was punctuated. Not a syllable out of order. All to ensure her sister understood the gravity of doing everything perfectly, "The Star Shard responds to necessity. If one doesn't steel their heart, the most fleeting of thoughts can lead to the artifact's activation. Calm your heart. Focus on Eraqus and nothing else. Grasp that mental image with everything. Do not let go. And I shall do the rest."

"Yeah, yeah..."

Grumbling at the way her sis was barking orders, Ryuko took a deep breath before closing her eyes. She focused on the arrogant prick's stupid face as Satsuki held the Star Shard in her other hand. For what felt like hours, she continued focusing on the Keyblade Master, counting each and every second. But when nothing continued happening, and she started growing increasingly restless, she opened one eye.

"Hey, how long does it take for -"

Chapter 9.3

*Ardyn Izunia remains one of my favorite characters to write, besides Ryuko, of course. In the span of a single sentence, he can greet someone while subtly threatening them. All without losing his friendly smirk. Ardyn is Ryuko's personal enemy. The Grand Couturier of **Don't Lose Your Heart**. He has a personal vendetta against Ryuko for what she did in Lindblum. If she'd fought against him, lost as she did, only to delay the inevitable? In that case, Ardyn wouldn't have any reason to seek retribution since he already obtained what he sought. But now that he cannot? His anger towards Ryuko is matched only by his desire to see her suffer. To watch her heart shatter as he destroys everything she cherishes. And then, only then, will he end her existence.*

In other words - he hates Ryuko while she despises him. The feeling is completely mutual.

But he's also someone who witnessed the beginning and end of everything. He, alongside his brother, were alive, mere children, when the Keyblade War shattered reality.

[img:

<https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/finalfantasy/images/9/9d/Ardyn-Izunia-Train-FFXV.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20170127035200>]

“Ugh...”

She didn't open her eyes, not even after the super weird sensation vanished and her sneakers touched solid ground. The world was still spinning. And it felt like her lunch was about to come up the wrong way. Whatever sort of magic controlled the Star Shard, it wasn't anything like normal teleportation. And her sis somehow mastered it? Ryuko didn't know how her big sis dealt with something that made her heart feel like it was getting sucked through one of those super

fancy straws, but as the light faded, she lowered her arms, the thought of *why* she wasn't holding Satsuki's hand never crossing her mind.

"Geez, Satsuki..."

Running a hand through her hair, she clenched her other hand into a fist, annoyance causing her eyebrow to sporadically twitch, "You could have at least... warned... me..."

The empty silence was deafening.

With a sudden lurch, Ryuko opened her eyes, pupils shrinking at the encompassing darkness. There was nothing around. No other noises besides the howling wind constantly gnawing at her heart. It rustled her hair. It caused goosebumps to race down her spine. And standing on the very edge of a battle-damaged platform, staring out into the inky darkness, wasn't the best first impression after leaving Alexandria. Particularly when one of the mountains way in the distance resembled an expensive dessert after someone scoops off the whipped cream.

"Hey Satsuki!"

Cupping both hands around her mouth, she shouted into the void. Her voice echoed against the darkness. But nobody answered. And she began panicking. Damn it! Satsuki had warned her about concentration being important. And she *had* lost focus when the stupid Star Shard hadn't immediately activated. But that had been only for a moment! Was it enough to screw everything up? Did opening her eyes somehow separate them?

No! She refused to believe that!"

"Tch! She's probably somewhere nearby..."

After kicking a piece of debris off the edge of the platform, she listened carefully. Every bounce caused her eyes to narrow.

Listening to the echoes of the fist-sized rock fade away into nothingness caused her mouth to twitch. So, she kicked another rock into the darkened void. Only this time, with enough force to send it flying sideways for quite a while, before turning on the spot, the sole of her sneaker grinding against the ground.

Only for her jaw to immediately drop.

“What the...”

This was the Land of Departure, no questions about it.

But all of a sudden, Beatrix being unable to reach Eraqus started making a lot of sense.

Another shiver raced down her spine, something unrelated to the cold wind whipping across the crater-marked courtyard. Everything had gone to hell. It looked like a goddamn tornado passed through the place. Only much worse. The sun was gone, replaced by a swirling sphere of darkness floating above the half-destroyed castle. The chains which had once connected the castle with the surrounding mountains were gone. Rubble lay scattered around her feet. And a feeling of *wrongness* clung to the air, whispering against her heart. It caused her hands to clench, fingers curling tightly enough for her knuckles to bleed white.

It felt like someone sucked all the warmth and happiness from the Land of Departure.

[“We really *should* stop meeting like this, Ryuko.”](#)

The familiar voice snapped her back to reality.

A sharp, almost pained hiss escaped between her clenched teeth when Ardyn Izunia sauntered through the castle’s front doors. Her eyes widened. Worry briefly set into her heart. And just as quickly, she snapped her right arm outwards, Threadcutter materializing alongside a flash of crimson stars.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you missed me.”

Ardyn waved at the bewildered Keyblade Master from his perch atop the stairs. Mockery clung to his heart. Amusement tainted whatever respect could be derived. Silhouetted against the ruined castle, watching the girl angrily draw the Scissor Blade in a single, sweeping motion, he pulled upon the brim of his fedora, traces of darkness momentarily flickering between his fingers, “Then again, you’re probably concerned with this world’s abysmal condition.”

“Where’s Satsuki!?”

With a metallic *clang*, the Scissor Blade snapped towards the psychotic asshole, “Tell me where she is RIGHT NOW!!!”

“Satsuki, you say? Hmm...”

It had to be nothing more than a trick of the light. For a moment, long enough for her to *really* consider throwing caution to the wind if it meant wiping the arrogant smirk off the smug bastard’s face, he looked genuinely surprised. As if none of this was part of his plan.

“Ah, you’re referring to your sister.”

Mulling over the question with purposeful hesitance, Ardyn took his first step downwards, dust clinging to his boots. And yet, halfway down the stairs, he stopped. With the bitter wind nipping at his nose, he pressed a finger against his lips. He glanced sideways, staring at some unseen object in the distance, before refocusing his attention upon the newly risen Keyblade Master, “Tis an awful shame, wouldn’t you agree? To have come so far... reuniting with your lovely sister after such a harrowing journey... only to lose her again so quickly. I can only imagine -”

The Scissor Blade stabbed itself into the ground, momentarily grabbing his attention when it subsequently *shattered* solid rock.

He twisted sideways, feet dancing one over the other, a broad grin stretching from ear to ear upon Ryuko's launch through the air. Magic clung to her Keyblade. It tinted the transformed weapon pearl white, granting the yellow and crimson colorations an almost pale hue.

For more than a dozen... then two... then three... strikes, all of which were swung in the blink of an eye, he countered the girl's phenomenal offense. All without moving from his original spot. An ephemeral katana manifested in his waiting fingers after the first blow, crimson darkness dripping from the phantasmal weapon like oily water. Each deflected or parried strike scattered motes of magic. Light and darkness flashed in alternating explosions, each of which illuminating the sadistic grin adorning his features. Back and forth the girl moved, Keyblade and limbs naught more than blurs of twisting motion.

In chaotic patterns, she danced around him, Keyblade striking from multiple, confusing angles.

And yet to him, someone possessing more than their share of experience, her fighting style was blatantly straightforward.

"Damn it!"

Vaulting over Ardyn Izunia as the bastard lazily swung his katana towards her neck, Ryuko felt the bitter wind pressing against her heart. It rustled her hair. It caused her to grimace as she landed at the base of the stairs, right knee touching the ground. With her toes curled inside her sneakers, she snarled, breathing deeply to catch her breath. God damn it! The bastard was just as good as she remembered. She'd thrown everything into Ars Arcanum, all without anything to show. Not a single cut. And worse? What made her eyebrow twitch and heart clench, was that she knew... they *both* knew... he'd been holding back.

Because if the bastard had been up to the challenge, she wouldn't be standing on the ground, *thinking* about what he could do to her.

"If you must know..."

The moment those words spilled from his mouth, she leapt backwards. And just in time. Darkness oozed from Ardyn's eyes and mouth as his features turned daemoniac. His tanned skin paled to alabaster. Her own heart beat a mile a minute before she instinctively reached outwards, fingers latching around the Scissor Blade's handle. And in one smooth motion, yanked it out of the ground.

Only to snarl when the psychotic bastard didn't so much as move a muscle.

"... you arrived alone. Without company, I should clarify."

The illusionary katana dissipated into motes of crimson darkness. The daemoniac features betraying his prior treachery - something he'd laid to rest long ago - faded, once more returning his façade to normal. And with mockery clinging to his voice, he glanced sideways, seemingly interested in something lurking out of sight, "As for your sister? I know not her location."

"You expect me to believe that?"

It took effort not to gag at the bile spewing from the bastard's mouth. With a wide, sweeping arc of her arm, she aimed Threadcutter at the asshole, keychain jingling alongside the soft light constantly radiating from the Keyblade. Knuckles bleeding white from the unrestrained anger coursing through her veins, she flipped the Scissor Blade into a reverse grip, fingers tightly clenching the curved handle, "No way this is a freaking coincidence!"

"Well, since you've asked so nicely, I'm here to retrieve something that once belonged to me."

Calmly, almost callously, brushing imaginary dust from atop his shoulders, Ardyn ignored the girl's unstated threat. Darkness momentarily flickered around his features, obtaining the newly promoted Keyblade Master's attention. He could sense the darkness lurking inside her heart. A monstrous, untapped power. And yet, upon finally descending the stairs preventing them from speaking face-to-face, he decided against mentioning such personal details.

It was the least he could do.

"Nothing truly important, mind you. Simply... an old heirloom. Something that, until quite recently, had been guarded by this world's steward."

Ryuko's eyes widened as everything - what Ardyn was saying and the shit he was purposely keeping tucked away - fell into place.

"YOU freed the Cloud of Darkness, didn't you!?"

An amused chortle was her only answer.

"I'm honored you think so highly of me, Ryuko. Sadly, you'd be mistaken."

Ardyn clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. To a stranger, perhaps anyone unfamiliar with the man, the gesture sounded wistful. Almost regretful. But to Ryuko, who'd been on the receiving end of his monstrous strength *and* forced to listen to his prattling speeches, arrogant practically dripped from his heart, "It was not I who unleashed the ancient wraith of darkness upon the worlds, but someone else. I believe you know him as... Xehanort."

She almost snorted.

"Gee, thanks for the heads up."

Angrily biting the inside of her cheek, Ryuko stopped herself from spitting onto the ground. Who was Ardyn trying to fool? As if pinning

everything on Xehanort was enough to calm her down. As if! Hell, she wasn't surprised. Because this made too much sense. When Beatrix had told her and Satsuki about the Cloud of Darkness, two names had immediately popped into her mind. Xehanort and Ardyn. Both could have worked because either one of the bastards was batcrap crazy enough to mess around with something that freaking dangerous.

"Anything else you gonna tell me?"

This time, she *did* spit onto the ground.

"As a matter of fact, yes..."

Ardyn glanced aside, seemingly unbothered by the insult. Sarcasm, or perhaps not, dripped from every word as, with nothing more than casual difference, he removed his fedora, "The man believes himself somewhat of an expert on darkness. And in a manner of speaking, he would be correct. However, he overestimates his abilities."

He held out his arm, fedora grasped within his fingers. For a moment, nothing was said. Not a single word. Silence reigned between them, broken only by the chilled wind that, eventually with Ardyn's explicit consent, carried the accessory into the surrounding darkness, "Impatience tempers his intelligence. This destruction... this tragic chaos... results from his growing madness."

Ryuko's heart sunk into the pit of her stomach when *something* appeared in the bastard's outstretched hand.

"Xehanort sought to pit master against student."

To confess he wasn't surprised by the girl's bewilderment would be wrong. As much as he behaved otherwise - and to be fair, he usually didn't care - the unfathomable darkness lurking within Ryuko's heart manifested some semblance of curiosity. If he'd known prior to her arrival she'd react so strangely to seeing the Keyblade previously possessed by the steward of this world, he would have made more

of a show, “Yet something went amiss. Perhaps the boy refused to play along. Thus, in order to rectify the otherwise insurmountable barrier to his plans, Xehanort roused the Cloud of Darkness from its slumber.”

Ryuko turned out *everything*.

She didn’t pay attention to a single word spilling from the asshole’s mouth.

“DROP IT!!!”

Nearly shouting at the top of her lungs, spittle flew between her teeth. As much as she disliked the prick, no goddamn way was she going to let this bastard so much as *touch* Eraqus’s Keyblade. The guy deserved better! Sliding her right foot outwards, lips pulled into a snarl, exposing sharpened incisors as crimson spread throughout her feathery hair, she swept both hardened Life Fiber blade and Keyblade crosswise in front of her chest, motes of light clinging to their edges, “Or I’m gonna cut off your freaking hand!”

“Ah, ah, ah!”

With the departed master’s Keyblade propped against his shoulder, Ardyn pivoted on the spot, purposely placing his back towards the enraged girl, “You mustn’t take what’s not yours.”

A stream of superheated fireballs, each no larger than his head yet packing enough magical force to significantly injure someone lacking his supernatural fortitude, was the girl’s retort to his otherwise polite inquiry.

“If revenge is what your heart truly desires...”

Visceral darkness oozed from Ardyn’s existence without his voice shifting an octave. His features paled to alabaster. The whites of his eyes darkened to black. A writhing and twisting purple-black miasma wafted from his clothing. And without turning around, nor

considering, even for the slightest modicum of time, the newly promoted Keyblade Master close to his equal, smirked as every fireball, crafted with loving hatred, simultaneously dissipated into cooling embers slowly spiraling to the ground.

“... Xehanort waits where light and darkness once clashed...”

The sole of his boot ground against strewn rubble as he slowly turned around, facing the enraged girl with callous aplomb, “... the Keyblade Graveyard.”

“Bullshit!”

Threadcutter fell an inch, no more, as Ryuko sneered. Without tearing her eyes away from the bastard, she propped her toes underneath the Scissor Blade and kicked upwards, sending the spinning hardened Life Fiber sword into her waiting fingers, “Now you’re just making shit up!”

“On the contrary, Ryuko. It’s a very *real* place.”

Ardyn clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth at the girl’s ignorance. In the same disappointed gesture, he tossed aside the previous steward’s Keyblade. The scorched weapon bounced across the courtyard. It clattered against upturned rock and disheveled masonry. All but ignoring the subtle twitching infected Ryuko’s mouth as her eyes tracked the murdered master’s blade, he raised a single finger over his shoulder, “It’s there that Xehanort awaits not you. Nor I. Nor even Beatrix. No, he’s waiting for *Terra*.”

“Terra?”

Ryuko’s eyes widened, “What the hell does Xehanort want with him?”

“The boy’s heart has been consumed by revenge. Something I know quite a little about...”

He chuckled, mouth stretched into a smirk stretching from ear to ear. Grinding his boot against the stone masonry, he pivoted on the spot, daemonic features rapidly returning to some semblance of normal, "... which is why I shall grant you passage to the graveyard. No strings attached. Consider it... a gesture of good will."

"What the hell are you planning?"

The corner of her mouth twitched as crimson light flickered around the Scissor Blade and Threadcutter. Both blades quivered, more from anticipation than nervousness, while her right foot slid backwards, "Last I checked, you wanted to kill not just me, but everyone I knew!"

"True, scant would satisfy me more than removing those you cherish. One by one. Starting with your dear sister."

His lips *popped*, an almost mocking sound, as he allowed the brutal honesty accompanying the otherwise jovial retort to linger upon the peripheral of Ryuko's heart. He saw the master's unique weapons tremble in her grasp. They quivered, each seeking to rend whatever flesh composed his body. Yet, despite the threat to his health, Ardyn raised two fingers, one on each hand, "But something rather... important... has come to my attention. And thus, for the moment, you and I share a common objective - [Kingdom Hearts](#)."

"Say what?"

A bead of sweat trickled down Ryuko's cheek. It pooled against the bottom of her chin. She knew all about Kingdom Hearts. Including how batshit *dangerous* it was, "I don't care how strong you are! If you're looking for Kingdom Hearts, I'm going to kick your freaking ass black and blue!"

"Contrary to your expectations, I care naught for Kingdom Hearts. The immense power... and the blade required to summon it... concerns me not."

Ardyn stepped forward, the sole of his boot hitting the ground with an echoing *clack*.

“However, I’m afraid the same cannot be said about Xehanort.”

Sighing deeply, he glanced about, eyes tracking from Ryuko to the discarded Keyblade before returning to the girl, “If he were to succeed, my long-awaited retribution against the regent would be made forfeit. Which would be a problem.”

“You expect me to feel sorry for you!?”

Ryuko’s fingers tightened around Threadcutter, knuckles bleeding white, as her lips twisted into a hateful sneer, “Screw you! I couldn’t give a rat’s ass about your stupid revenge! But if Xehanort’s looking for Kingdom Hearts, he’s gotta be stopped!”

“A most interesting decision, Ryuko.”

Darkness writhed across the peripheral of her vision as Ardyn smiled, something that set her heart on edge, “Kingdom Hearts might be... *our*... pressing concern. As is assisting the boy for you. Yet what of your master, the indominable Beatrix? Or your sister, whose passion ignites the very fabric of reality? Have you forgotten about them already?”

“Not a goddamn chance!”

A burst of sparks danced in front of her face as she slammed Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade together. And unbeknownst to her, but apparent to Ardyn, whose smirk broadened, the bright crimson undertone finished spreading throughout her feathery hair, “No way’s the Cloud of Darkness strong enough to beat Beatrix! And if you think Satsuki’s a pushover, you’re gonna eat those words when she beats the shit out of you!”

“You wound me, Ryuko...”

False sorrow clung to Ardyn's tone as he held a hand over his heart, "... my feelings, at least."

To him, it was nothing more than a short jaunt. A simple step easier than breathing. But to Ryuko, his presence blinked across the courtyard. Faster than even her eyes could follow his movements, accompanied by the faintest whisper of darkness, Ardyn reappeared several feet away, "But if it shall ease your heart, know this. Agree to this deal, shall we call it, involving Xehanort and I shan't seek your sister nor anyone else you care for. Simply put, my retribution for your interference on Lindblum will be limited to you and you alone."

Every muscle in her body tensed at the ridiculous offer. The Scissor Blade quivered alongside Threadcutter. She wanted nothing more than to stab the bastard through the stomach and rip him apart! After all the shit he's pulled... and the crap she didn't know about... it was the least he deserved!

"... fine!"

It physically *hurt* agreeing with Ardyn. And she meant it! The moment she said 'fine,' her heart immediately clenched. But she had no goddamn choice. One way or another, she would take down Xehanort and save Terra!

"Splendid!"

With nothing more than the slightest twitch of his fingers... a flick of his wrist while sweeping his arm outwards... Ardyn pulled at the darkness composing his existence. He sought out the darkness composing the Lanes Between the worlds. In the time required for a single beat of the girl's heart, quicker than she could raise her Keyblade or the other, equally fascinating blade, darkness sprung from nothingness. Writhing and twisting, contorting upon itself before erupting into oozing streams, shadows manifested into a corridor. A swirling gateway of purple-black miasma beckoning their respective hearts.

“Now, now. You mustn’t tarry, Ryuko.”

Ardyn smirked, a savage grin matched only by the girl’s inherent frustration, “After all, you have a friend to save, do you not?”

Last edited: Nov 11, 2018

Chapter 9.4

I'm really excited about this chapter. But I've said this before and I'll say it again - Ryuko has no predestined future. She's not fated to save the Realm of Light. Nor to play the role of some grand hero. You can argue whether that's Sora's job. She was merely in the right place at the right time. Through no fault of her own, she was dragged from her world to Lindblum. She interfered with Ardyn's retribution simply because she was on her way to see Regent Cid to look for a way home. She gained the Keyblade due to Mickey speaking with Yen Sid about how she risked her life for Lindblum. And Yen Sid, in turn, recommended her to Beatrix. Everything about her journey since Day One had been through no grand plan nor scheme. Nor some ancient prophecy written more than a few millennia ago. But rather, Ryuko deciding to do things her way and screw the consequences in the process.

One more thing. I know Terra's Keyblade turns into Ends of the Earth. That still happened. But along with Threadcutter, I've decided not to change the name. It's still Earthshaker.

[img:

[https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/a/a3/Kingdom_Hearts_02_KHIIIFM.png/800px-Kingdom_Hearts_02_KHIIIFM.png\]](https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/a/a3/Kingdom_Hearts_02_KHIIIFM.png/800px-Kingdom_Hearts_02_KHIIIFM.png)

[“I've had enough!”](#)

Twisting around the razor-sharp spikes of ice glistening in the moonlight, blood dripped from the cuts crisscrossing his arms and chest. A stain of crimson blossomed on his right thigh as he stepped forward, promptly disappearing into darkness before the magic finished collapsing upon his position. The world spun around his heart, light and darkness merging together into twilight. Earthshaker shimmered with a dull earthen glow in his tightening fingers, countering Vanitas before the insane psychopath finished swinging his own Keyblade.

In a flurry of magical sparks, the masked bastard stumbled backwards, boots skidding along the plateau, a subtle yet unmistakable scoff passing through unseen clenched teeth.

As the wind whipped through his hair, he spun around Xehanort, narrowed eyes tracking the murderer's Keyblade every step of the way. He focused on the soft jingle of the Keyblade and the subtle tensing of Xehanort's shoulders. He sought any further traces of magic gathering upon the edges of his heart. An unmistakable darkness. Spinning tightly on the spot with his right foot crossing over the left, bringing him face-to-face with the Keyblade Master, he missed the bastard's widening eyes.

And in an explosion of darkness and magic, Earthshaker lurched to a painful halt when Xehanort pinned it against his own Keyblade.

"Go!"

The word escaped between clenched teeth. A bead of sweat, hidden by the brilliant light of Kingdom Hearts, trickled between his wrinkles as he propped his left hand against No Name's blade. And yet, forced onto the defensive by Terra's impressive strength, he afforded himself the slightest semblance of satisfaction. Inadvertent or otherwise, Ryuko's influence nearly dampened Terra's potential. If the girl had been a bit more proactive instead of returning to Alexandria alongside her sister, the complications to his plans might have become untenable.

But no longer.

Terra was almost ready.

All the boy required was one final push.

"Take what Ventus owes you!"

After deliberately placing maniac emphasis upon every word, he grinned at Terra's horrified reaction. Perhaps it was a bit excessive.

But the boy was stubborn. He wouldn't completely open himself to darkness without proper motivation. And what could motivate someone more than losing their dearest friends, "And while you're at it, kill Aqua!"

The *callousness* sucked every last trace of warmth from Terra's heart, "What!?"

Despite struggling to pull Earthshaker away from Xehanort's Keyblade, Terra whipped his head around. With bated breath, he watched Vanitas nod in excitement. Then, as if purposely rubbing salt in the wound, the psychotic monster lurched away, prepared to carry out the nightmarish task. Panic punched him in the gut. The thought of Vanitas hurting Aqua and Ven pushed him forward. It resonated with the darkness dwelling inside his heart. Something he'd desperately been repressing and working to control. But with every step Vanitas took, his self-control weakened.

Until, in a burst of darkness, he shattered their stalemate, sending Xehanort stumbling backwards.

"Bastard!"

Momentarily slipping against the ground, he pivoted with a growl, amber light gathering upon Earthshaker, "I won't let you hurt them!"

He was almost within range of intercepting Vanitas when something whispered against the periphery of his senses. Glancing leftward, his eyes widened upon seeing nothing but darkness and emptiness. A sharp gasp escaped his throat. The passage of time slowed to an agonizing crawl as Xehanort appeared to his right, Keyblade absent, before gravity suddenly inverted itself.

"Tsk!"

The surprise attack swept his feet out from underneath him. It knocked the breath from his lungs. Falling backwards, Keyblade nearly slipping from his fingers, his eyes widened when Xehanort's

fingers reached towards his throat. Acting purely upon instinct, he punched the ground, fingers clenching handfuls of dirt. Locking both shoulder and elbow, he ignored the minor discomfort before angrily shifting his center of balance. He lurched sideways, the palm of his hand pressing against rubble and sharpened rock. With a defiant explosion of power and energy, he vaulted across the plateau, not stopping until he had some breathing room.

“You see how powerless you are to save them?”

Xehanort smirked maliciously at Terra’s futile efforts. Yes! This was it! He could feel it! The hatred and rage dwelling inside the boy’s heart could no longer be contained! In a matter of moments, Terra would finally allow darkness to take root within his heart once and for all, “Savor that anger! Let it empower -”

It started as nothing more than a [twinkle of sapphire](#).

A pinprick of shimmering blue silhouetted against the majesty of Kingdom Hearts.

To Vanitas, the only emotion filling his incomplete heart was satisfaction. It blinded him to everything and everyone. After an eternity of waiting, Ventus was finally strong enough for their reunion. What he’d wanted more than anything since their involuntary separated was nearly at hand. He was only a few steps from the edge of the plateau. A leap of faith bringing him straight to Ventus. Killing the other Keyblade wielder was a spectacular bonus. Not because of Xehanort’s orders. No, not that. He wanted to slaughter the blue haired bitch because she and that other woman *humiliated* him on Radiant Garden.

Simply imagining her blood pooling on the ground, Ventus forced to watch as she suffocated with every gurgling breath, was *exhilarating*.

But as he took that final step, dirt crunching underneath his boot, something whispered against his incomplete heart. For a moment, he was baffled. But his confusion quickly transformed into hatred.

Frustration bubbled to the surface. The familiarity of the approaching presence elicited a hate-filled snarl. It infuriated him. It was enough for hundreds - no, thousands - of new Unversed to manifest across the Realm of Light.

Shunting his center of mass sideways, he twisted outside the bounds of normal biology.

And with inhuman defiance, Void Gear intercepted the foreign Keyblade, sending the ruby and gold weapon spinning off into the darkness.

Which left him wide open when Ryuko's fist *smashed* against the front of his helmet.

"AND JUST WHERE..."

The Keyblade Armor creaked from the strain as her knuckles made direct contact with the bullshit Vanitas called his goddamn face.

"... DO YOU THINK..."

Maybe it was nothing more than her imagination playing tricks. But for a moment, long enough for the sensation of shattering glass to ripple up her arm, everything slowed down. Even the strangely-shaped moon seemed different. And then she twisted her wrist, *forcing* her fist through Vanitas's helmet.

"... YOU'RE GOING!?"

Void Gear slipped from his disbelieving fingers. The supernatural, almost inhuman, strength behind Ryuko's haymaker forced his head sideways, something that would have broken an ordinary being's neck. Countless shards of shattered glass reflected Kingdom Hearts as darkness spewed from his broken nose like water. But he didn't feel anything but unadulterated hatred. His fingers twitched. His shoulders trembled. But in that split second between heartbeats,

Keyblade reappearing in a flash of swirling darkness, ruby light began twinkling around the bitch's fist.

First a single flash.

Then a blinding cacophony.

The light *forced* his head sideways.

All within the fraction of a second before he was blasted halfway across the Keyblade Graveyard.

"Shit!"

Once the long-overdue high of punching the masked bastard square in the jaw wore off, Ryuko flipped backwards, propped one foot against the air and *pushed*. With a dull whump, the gust of magical wind pushed her in the opposite direction. The clacking of metal grinding against itself filled her heart as she landed on the platform. She wanted to smile. A laugh just about forced itself free. But watching the psychopath smash into another piece of scenery brought something far more important to mind, "What the hell was he doing here?"

Terra was speechless.

He couldn't count the number of questions on his mind. There were so many things he wanted to ask. After everything that happened since Radiant, she appeared now? Was she tracking Master Xehanort? Did something happen with that monstrous Heartless? He didn't know. But when Ryuko ripped off her helmet before bringing out Threadcutter, the Keyblade different from what he remembered, he forced out a smirk, more from relief than anything else.

"Boy, am I glad to see you."

As the honest shock of Ryuko's surprising arrival, not to mention decking Vanitas clear across the horizon, wore off, he leapt across

the platform. In three skips, eyes never leaving the murderer watching their every movement, he skidded to a halt next to Ryuko, "But how did -"

"We'll talk later!"

She was happy to shoot the breeze with Terra. Knowing he was alright and Ardyn Izunia was blowing smoke was a heavy load off her shoulders. But she was a girl with priorities. And right now, beating the shit out of Xehanort stood at the very top of her list, "Because right now..."

Having successfully interrupted Terra's question, Ryuko looped two fingers through the Scissor Blade before yanking the hardened Life Fiber sword out of its scabbard. It spun through the air, light from the strangely-shaped moon dancing on the crimson edge. For a moment, the sword hovered overhead, silhouetted against the night, before she reached out, caught the blade and alongside a metallic *clang*, aimed it squarely between Xehanort's eyes, "... you and me, we gotta kick this psychopath's ass!"

"Yeah, you're right."

A breathless chortle escaped Terra's heart. Maybe it was just him, but Ryuko's confidence bolstered his resolve. If she could stand strong after everything that happened to her, he could do the same. They both wanted the same thing - revenge against Xehanort. But even so, there was something he *needed* to say, "Ryuko, you need to know! We were completely wrong about Vanitas! He's not Ven's brother!"

"What?"

A hiss of air whistled between Ryuko's teeth, "Then who the hell is he?"

"I don't know how, but Xehanort found a way to remove Ven's darkness," Terra ground his teeth. No matter what it took, even if it

meant going to the ends of the worlds, he would do anything to never hear Ven beg them to kill him. Not again, "Vanitas is that darkness. To create the X-Blade, Xehanort needs him and Ven to fight! We can't let that happen!"

"You disappoint me, Terra."

Another time, another moment, he would have graciously allowed them to finish their conversation. Granted, wasting time was the epitome of naivety. Yet the likelihood Beatrix or his brethren finished dealing with the Cloud of Darkness in such a short amount of time was almost zero. But he knew, perhaps better than anyone, accomplishing such an implausible task didn't make it impossible. Brevity was to his advantage. Calculated risks were one thing, but when dealing with someone like Ryuko Matoi, an outwardly ordinary girl who miraculously found ways to interfere with his plans, he couldn't afford taking any chances.

To presume victory so close to the finish would mean ignoring the many ways Ryuko could still ruin everything.

"I expected more from you..."

His boot *stomped* against the ground, kicking up a cloud of dust and forcing both Terra and Ryuko onto their respective guards, "To have come so far... to breach the barrier separating light from darkness in pursuit of retribution... only to cower like a scared child! How pitiful!"

The amusement pulling against his expression momentarily faltered. A calculated, purposeful decision. With an undeserving scoff, he clenched his empty hand into a resolute fist, glove crinkling from the movement, "If not for Ryuko, you would have been powerless to save your friends! It was only her assistance which prevented Aqua's untimely demise!"

"Oh my god, do you ever shut up?"

Ryuko felt the beginnings of a migraine. First in her temple. And then down the side of her face. Just listening to Xehanort's insane rambling was seriously pissing her off. She couldn't understand how anyone had ever trusted the freaking bastard. Everything about Xehanort screamed 'suspicious!' With that thought firmly etched on her heart, she shifted into a familiar stance. Ruby light flickered across the Scissor Blade as the supernaturally-sharpened sword pointed squarely between Xehanort's eyes, "But if yer feeling so chatty, start blabbing about why your little psychopath destroyed my world!"

"Ah, yes..."

The irony behind the passionate accusation was laughable.

Despite her vaunted efforts to shift the majority of the blame onto his shoulders, he was legitimately innocent. It wasn't until her world succumbed to darkness, the aftershocks rippling across space and time, had he become aware of Vanitas's actions. Was it regrettable? Perhaps, but only because the consequences had necessitated adjusting his plans. Ryuko's survival and personal conflict with Vanitas had brought his existence into light. It had caused Beatrix and his brethren to become proactive ahead of schedule. It had forced Eraqus into changing Terra's Mark of Mastery.

Something that, if not for Eraqus's stubbornness towards darkness, could have derailed years of meticulous planning.

On the other hand, if not for Vanitas's single independent action since his separation from Ventus, Ryuko never would have left her world. She wouldn't have found herself on Lindblum and proved capable of wielding the Keyblade.

And he, through the disruptions caused by her interference on Radiant Garden, wouldn't have witnessed, firsthand and with his own eyes, the marvelous darkness lurking within Ryuko's heart. A shadowy, incomprehensible miasma shimmering with unholy brilliance.

“It had been an examination, of sorts.”

He dismissed No Name in such a flaunting and purposeful manner that Terra and Ryuko immediately understood his intent, “Due to Beatrix’s admirable persistence, I couldn’t adequately test Vanitas. Thus, I sought a more suitable place. One where he wouldn’t be easily disturbed. A world where Vanitas could test his full potential without fear of interruption.”

“WHAT!?”

Ryuko’s outburst was almost disappointing. Her heart positively brimmed with hatred and darkness. Hearing his ‘confession’ had destroyed what little control she possessed. Yet, much as always, it remained pure. Unstained by darkness. But now, there was something else. It whispered on the periphery of his senses. Perhaps it was Kingdom Hearts resonating with her heart and Keyblade. Or perhaps anger and hatred finally overcame whatever strange control she possessed over darkness. He didn’t know. And that was both frustrating and infatuating.

Despite decades of immersing himself into darkness, everything about Ryuko Matoi remained an unsolved enigma.

“The destruction of your world was unexpected.”

A sadistic smirk pulled against his lips. It started as a chuckle in the back of his throat. Long-concealed insanity, purposefully created to shatter whatever restrained remained on Ryuko and Terra’s hearts, echoed across the moonlit landscape, “Yet the fact Vanitas achieved the impossible was proof enough he was ready to reunite with Ventus and forge the X-Blade!”

“You... goddamn... bastard...”

Ryuko *seethed*.

Her eyes widened before quickly narrowing. Hatred and rage bubbled within her heart. It threatened to escape. Something she wasn't in the right mindset to stop. The Scissor Blade and Threadcutter trembled. Her lips pulled backwards, exposing sharpened teeth as she glared at Xehanort, hoping beyond reason *intent* was enough to break every bone in the psychopath's body. She wanted to grind the asshole's smug and arrogant face into a bloody smear! Her shoulders quivering as shadows overtook her eyes, Ryuko took a step forward, determined to make her dreams reality.

Only to immediately stop when Mako's laughter whispered against her heart.

"Tch!"

After biting her lip hard enough to draw blood - and clear her mind - she viciously removed the taste of copper from her mouth, "Nice try! But that ain't gonna work on me!"

Underneath the vibrant, almost mystical, light radiating from Kingdom Hearts, thunderous clouds swirling around the manifested origin of existence itself, Xehanort's smirk momentarily faltered. Without another word, nor granting the opportunity to further her inexplicable defiance, he swept his arm outwards, fingers clenched nearly into a fist. Alongside the thunderous eruption of darkness, No Name once more materialized in his waiting fingers, arcs of lightning and magic crackling between the razor-sharp edges.

In another seemingly flashy movement, yet one Beatrix would have found difficulty searching for an opening, he shifted one foot forward while loosening his shoulders, arthritic muscles preparing themselves for one final confrontation.

Across the plateau, one eyebrow still twitching, Ryuko forced herself to calm down. After dealing with Nui Harime and Ragyo Kiryuin's revolting manipulations, no way would she let this second-rate bastard pull one over on her! Not a chance! He wasn't nearly good

enough! And with that thought driving her heart forward, she flipped the Scissor Blade into a reverse grip. As dual-colored strands of feathery hair fell in front of her eyes, she crossed Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade underneath her chin, crackles of brilliant light painting the contours of her face crimson.

At Ryuko's side, wisps of darkness coiling around Earthshaker, Terra took a shuddering breath. A bead of sweat trickled down his cheek. Shifting the sole of his boot sideways, pebbles grinding against the heel, his eyes narrowed at Xehanort's confidence. A cold chill pierced into his heart at the darkness radiating from the murderer. But instead of swallowing the bile rising from his stomach into his throat, he steeled his nerves, ground his teeth together, and snarled.

For what felt like an eternity, nothing happened.

But less than a heartbeat later, Ryuko glanced at Terra out of the corner of her eye.

Flexing his fingers around Earthshaker, Terra tilted his head just enough to look at Ryuko.

And simultaneously kicking off the ground, they rushed Xehanort. Earthshaker aiming high. Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade sweeping lower from both directions. And the murderous master, eyes widening a modicum from genuine interest, vaulted backwards at the last possible second, explosions of light and darkness brushing against his swinging Keyblade.

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Chapter 9.5

This section demonstrates how a small change like... say... Vanitas getting sucker-punched across the Keyblade Graveyard instead of blindsiding Aqua can have significant impact. Without the threat to Aqua's life, Ventus wouldn't have recovered the strength of will to free himself. But on the other hand, without having to worry about getting attacked, Aqua could have helped free Ventus. A lot of things could have happened based on Vanitas NOT appearing at that moment.

On an unrelated note, we're finally about to see how Ragyo Kiryuin and Nui Harime fight in the Kill la Kill game.

[img:
https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/7/7a/0.2_Intro_13.png/800px-0.2_Intro_13.png]

"Hah... hah... can't believe... I forgot... rule number one..."

Braig felt like complete shit.

"Don't mess... with you... keyslingers..."

The arrowguns in his hands trembled as he glared at the blue haired master. Damn it, keyslingers really didn't know the meaning of holding back. Sure, there was *acting*. And then there was this. But no matter how things turned out, in the end, putting on a brave face wasn't exactly the easiest thing in the world. Every gulp of air burned his lungs. His uniform was coated with enough ice to cover half of Radiant Garden. Frost nibbled at his fingertips, making it difficult to keep the arrowguns from clattering to the ground. Blood oozed from his lips. The stuff seeped from a gash on his forehead, pooling around the eyepatch covering the scar stretching down the right side of his face.

And yet, he was smirking.

"But you wanna... know something?"

It might have sounded a little shocking to miss friendship and sunshine, but he wasn't scared. Not of her Keyblade. Or her scowl. Or hell, having his heart stolen. She was strong. He'd give her that much credit. She totally deserved the title of Keyblade Master. If they were friends, he'd pat her on the back and offer her a drink. But even with magic, the Keyblade and a heart-full of powerful light, Aqua wasn't a monster. She didn't have inhuman regeneration, super strength or anything equally unnerving.

Which meant even if it wasn't exactly part of the old coot's *master* plan, he still had a good chance of turning things around.

"That just means I made the right choice!"

Aqua pushed off the ground hard enough to kick up a cloud of dust.

"Not if I stop you!"

She tuned out everything, including the frustrating thug's sadistic laughter. Enough was enough! After barely stopping the maniac from taking potshots at Ven when he couldn't defend himself, she refused to allow him so much as a moment's respite!

"Ah! Not so fast!"

Even though the keyslinger summoned that annoying translucent barrier right before his arrows pierced her heart and other internal organs, Braig wasn't *too* peeved. He might have felt disappointment, but beggars couldn't be choosers. Especially when it came to the geezer's complicated scheme. Sure, things hadn't gone perfectly. The blood covering his face showed how much he'd underestimated Aqua. And his missing eye, which *hadn't* been part of any plan, still pissed him off. But despite some relatively minor setbacks, little miss sunshine was trapped within her own magic.

How ironic.

Yet he didn't stop firing.

Because the moment he decided to relax his fingers, the keyslinger would move, teleport somewhere else or something equally annoying. Like throw her Keyblade. And given everything *she* pulled after chucking her Keyblade, he wasn't about to give Aqua the slightest opportunity to apply her personal touch onto that frustrating combo.

"You know, for a Keyblade Master, you're not very - what's the word - oh, right, *smart*."

Grinning against the majestic backdrop of Kingdom Hearts high in the sky, Braig laughed at the keyslinger's expression, "You really thought I'd let you rush me? As if!"

Another flex of his fingers kept the keyslinger from answering. Despite everything, he was in a relatively good mood. No rainbow streams of magic homing towards his face. No ice or water blasting across the ground. No headaches trying to keep track of little miss friendship as she cartwheeled, danced and skated like the concept of friction didn't exist. If the old coot wanted him to keep Aqua and the other snot-nosed brat busy when Terra fulfilled his role, that was fine with him.

As long as he never had to fight *her* again, he was willing to do pretty much anything.

"Well, he wanted me to buy time..."

It wasn't exactly apparent to miss sunshine, but after a few seconds, his grin started faltering. What the hell was taking Xehanort so long? Maybe he never actually fought the brat thanks to *her* interference, but no way, not a chance, was the kid strong enough to take on the geezer and Vanitas at the same time. No way. It was goddamn impossible! Maybe with the power of darkness. But even then, there

would be explosions. Blasts of darkness erupting. But he couldn't feel anything out of the ordinary. Something unexpected must have happened, which wasn't good.

On the other hand, he'd already come this far.

What was the harm of pushing things a little further?

"So, what do you say we move onto round -"

A strangled cough forced its way out of the depths of his heart when a familiar, oh so familiar, light flickered against Kingdom Hearts. His amber eye, part of the deal he made with the geezer, subsequently widened at the accompanying explosion, not a few seconds later, that sent Vanitas rocketing across the Keyblade Graveyard.

"No way! How the hell is *she* here?"

Independently of the man's panicked reaction, Aqua glanced over her shoulder. She was *tired*. Maintaining a barrier to fend off the unending barrage drained whatever remained of her reserves. It was taking everything in her heart to not collapse onto her hands and knees. Without fanfare, she allowed the technique to dissipate into shards of shimmering magic. Rainfell scrapped against the ground as her shoulders rose and fell with every gasping breath. And yet, despite everything, relief graced her heart.

"Ryuko?"

The keyslinger's question sealed the deal.

His eye widening and heart racing a mile a minute, Braig stumbled backwards, almost tripping over a rock. One by one, his arrowguns clattered to the ground. Swallowing the lump in his throat, which felt like goddamn sandpaper, he didn't bother picking up his weapons. Not even when Aqua lowered her barrier. Nothing - and he meant nothing - could convince him to fight Ryuko. Not even the geezer threatening to steal his heart. He didn't know about the other

keyslingers tricking themselves into believing they had some grand role to play, but he wasn't sticking around to get caught in the crossfire.

"Screw this!"

Throwing aside any traces of bravery, Braig gave Aqua the middle finger before fleeing in the opposite direction, "The old coot can finish without me!"

"Wait!"

The word barely escaped her mouth as the horrible man fled into the darkness. But instead of chasing after him, Aqua stopped short, panting heavily to catch her breath. Underneath the bright alabaster light of Kingdom Hearts, she stumbled a few more steps, armor clanking. And with eyes widening, heart beating a mile a minute, she spun around.

"Ven!"

Despite the heaviness dragging down her arms and legs, she pushed herself beyond her limits. Dry heaving from exhaustion, shoulders rapidly rising and falling with every gasping and tired breath, Aqua couldn't shake the feeling something was wrong. Did that man really flee because of Ryuko? Grimacing at the thought this was nothing more than a trick, something to lower her guard, she nevertheless collapsed onto her knees with a relieved smile, refusing to allow anyone, particularly a heinous thug, weigh down her heart.

"A-Aqua?"

"Don't worry, Ven," Aqua gently cradled Ven, her breath visible as pale wisps upon the moonlight, "I'll help you! Let me just -"

"Need a hand?"

The unexpected voice caused her heart to nearly skip a beat. Rainfell shifted in her grasp. Not from worry or confusion or even fear. But genuine relief, "Mickey?"

"Sorry I'm late!"

Despite putting on a brave face in front of Aqua and Ven, Mickey couldn't help but blame himself. It was almost like Lindblum again. If he'd been only a little faster, maybe he could have helped Aqua defeat that uncouth ruffian. But just as quickly as doubt and despair wormed their way into his heart, he shook his head. No! There was no point worrying about stuff that's already happened! Everyone was counting on them to stop Xehanort! So, no matter how much the past hurt, he needed to keep moving forward.

"Oh!"

He chuckled from outright embarrassment before quickly hefting Star Seeker overhead, motes of magic, each glistening with alabaster radiance in the light of Kingdom Hearts, clinging to the Keyblade, "You should probably close your eyes. I'm still sorta working out the bugs. So, it... uh... it might get a little bright."

Aqua didn't think twice.

Turning away from Mickey, she immediately threw herself over Ven, shielding him from the immeasurably brilliant light radiating from the mouse's Keyblade. There was no mistaking its warmth. Nor the powerful effects. She never felt anything quite like it. And although it lasted no more than a few seconds, long enough register something happened, a sharp crackle immediate caught her attention. A soft gasp escaped her throat. Her hold around Ven tightened.

And she watched, genuinely smiling for the first time in what felt like hours, as the magical ice around Ven shattered into millions of pieces.

"Ven! Are you alright?"

"Y-Yeah, just give me a second," even though his armor absorbed most of the damage, Ven violently shivered. He could barely feel anything. Everything was numb. Yet he refused to relax. Not yet. Not until his friends were safe, "Thanks, Mickey. You're a real life-saver!"

"Don't mention it!"

A grin worked its way onto Ven's face, happiness that didn't quite reach his eyes as everything snapped back into focus, "Hey, how did you find us?"

"Well, you have Aqua to thank for that!"

One more extravagant swish of Star Seeker over his head and every cut, scrape and bruise on Aqua and Ven disappeared under a literal curtain of emerald magic, "I was tracking Vanitas when the guy got the jump on me. If she hadn't found me, well, who knows what could have happened!"

Mickey found himself staring more and more at Kingdom Hearts.

Well, not *at* Kingdom Hearts. Rather, he was watching what was happening underneath Kingdom Hearts.

It had been a long time since he'd seen, let alone spoken with, Ryuko. But there was no mistaking what he felt. Since the day they met, an otherwise chance encounter on the streets of Lindblum, her heart had been weighed down by anger and guilt. She'd blamed herself for Vanitas dragging her world into darkness. And those feelings, those dark emotions, no matter how many times everyone, himself included, said it wasn't her fault, had darkened Ryuko's heart. Sure, she never ignored him or walked away. She never shouted at him to shut up. She understood, even if the words never quite reached her heart, they were only trying to help.

But now, instead of that awful darkness and negativity, he couldn't feel anything besides resolve and determination.

"Once I woke up, Donald and Goofy filled me in! That's when I knew I needed to help you guys, no matter what it took!"

Another flash of crimson light followed by the familiar sensation of darkness drew their attention, "And it looks like we arrived just in the nick of time!"

"Xehanort... he mentioned Ryuko."

Clasping a hand over her heart, fingers slowly clenching into a relaxed fist, Aqua frowned, "He said she almost ruined his plans. Do you know what he was talking about?"

"Well, if I had to guess, it's probably because Ryuko's the reason everyone's looking for him!"

Ven's head whipped from right to left, "She did what?"

"After she headed back to Alexandria with Satsuki, Ryuko told Master Beatrix everything she knew. About Vanitas. Xehanort. Well, pretty much everything."

Mickey considered himself lucky. Or maybe, extremely fortunate was a better choice of words. Yen Sid's anger was awful. And he would know. Well, not entirely. Sure, he might have foolishly worn his master's sorcerer's hat. But after rescuing him from his own mistakes, Yen Sid had been more disappointed than angry. But from the storm brewing around the tower after he woke up, which had caused the very air to become electrified with unbridled magic, his master had been equally concerned *and* infuriated with Xehanort.

"Which explains Xehanort's desperation!"

Still staring at Kingdom Hearts and the clouds swirling around the forced manifestation, Mickey nodded vigorously, "It was only a matter of time until he paid for his crimes. Xehanort's strong, but against Master Beatrix and Yen Sid working together, he wouldn't

stand a chance. That's why he probably roused the Cloud of Darkness from its eternal slumber."

"The cloud of... darkness?"

There was something about the name that bothered Ven. Maybe it was exhaustion, but he could have sworn the name sounded awfully familiar. It was on the tip of his tongue. A memory almost like a faded dream. But no matter how hard he tried, he simply couldn't remember *where*, "What is that?"

"An incredibly powerful Heartless."

Mickey couldn't shake the feeling something awful was about to happen. Despite what some people thought, he wasn't naïve. A lot of things scared him. And the most prominent in his heart was Ardyn Izunia. The man was a monster. The personification of darkness. Even after using everything in his arsenal, not just to survive but help Ryuko and Gilgamesh, it hadn't been enough. If it weren't for Yen Sid, things would have taken an ugly turn for the worst.

Which only made the worry he felt *now*, weeks after that terrible afternoon, all the more troublesome.

"That's why there's no time to waste!"

He had utmost faith in his master. After all, while Yen Sid was sometimes a little too strict and didn't like it when he slacked off, the guy wasn't exactly a pushover. If there was anyone capable of stopping the Cloud of Darkness - with help, of course - before the balance between light and darkness permanently shifted, it would be Yen Sid, "Terra and Ryuko need our help!"

"Right!"

Aqua nodded, resolve glowing in her eyes, before turning towards Ven, "I'll distract Xehanort. While he's busy, you and Mickey -"

Time stopped.

The words died in her throat when reality abruptly paused. Bright light surrounding Ven's outstretched fingers. A small trace of Wayward Wind, caught between indistinguishable points of time, could be seen. Next to Aqua and no less caught off guard by the unsuspected attack, Mickey's brow was usually furrowed. But no matter their actions, all of them, down to the motes of dust rippling around their feet, stood frozen within a single moment of time.

A boot, flickering and translucent, as if unable to determine whether or not it truly existed, crunched against packed soil.

Obscured by a form-fitting black coat, gloves and accompanying hood casting unnatural shadows across their features, a figure phased through the cracks of time. Each stride they took caused their existence to become increasingly 'tethered' to the current reality. Until, pausing some distance from the frozen trio, wisps of pale vapor visible against the light of Kingdom Hearts, the transparency dissipated.

Not a sound could be heard as they raised their right hand. A sense of *wrongness* filled the air as electricity crackled between the fingers. Yet without a word, almost dispassionate and devoid of emotion, they clenched their fingers, clasping the ethereal blade as it manifested from nothingness and darkness.

As an identical blade materialized in their other hand, the figure's attention shifted. First to Mickey, then Aqua, then to Ventus, before once more returning to the blue haired master.

Quickly rotating their arms, both ethereal weapons held one over the other, arcs of energy violently crackling between the gently touching blades, the enigmatic interloper took a single step before lurching across the badlands. The stomping of their boots left ripples throughout stopped time, kicking up clouds of dust that momentarily flickered before freezing between successive moments.

Curling one arm over their shoulder while extending the other parallel to the ground, they sprinted across the glowing landscape, ethereal blades arcing towards the time-frozen master.

"LIGHT!!!"

Unseen eyes widened when light *exploded* from Mickey.

At the same time, the mysterious strange reacted to the surprising development. With one ethereal blade crossed over the other, they intercepted the mouse's Keyblade. A confrontation of clashing light and darkness. Their boots skidded along the ground, driving deepening wedges into the dirt. Yet before their knees buckled under the strain, darkness erupted from the depths of their heart. With a cross-wise counterattack, they drove Mickey backwards, pushing the offense much too quickly for the normal heart to follow.

"Ars Arcanum!"

Accompanied by the rapid fluttering of their coat, the figure diligently met the mouse's powerful strikes. Dancing back and forth underneath Kingdom Hearts, flipping overhead alongside the Keyblade wielder, electricity and light failing to illuminate the shadows beneath their hood, they waited for the opportune moment. And when Mickey's technique reaches its absolute pinnacle, releasing a star-like explosion of light along the length of his Keyblade, darkness enveloped their existence.

In a flicker of movement, barely perceptible to the naked eye, they reappeared behind Mickey, ethereal blades arcing towards the mouse's neck.

Only to immediately stagger backwards, blood spewing from the gushing wound on their upper arm.

But before the ethereal blade fell from their bloodied fingers, everything lurched to a halt. And then began rewinding. The blood

pooling under their feet reversed directions, falling up instead of down. The gash on their black coat started repairing itself.

Yet accompanied by a sound more along the lines of shattering glass than crystalline chiming, Mickey dispelled the esoteric temporal magic, leaving the figure absolutely *stunned*.

"Sorry!"

A certain harshness accompanied the singular word as Mickey pressed the advantage. Without giving the guy time to recover, he backflipped, both hands clasping Star Seeker as almost pearl-like light erupted from the Keyblade. Landing on the ground and immediately swinging the legendary blade, his normally friendly expression hardened when the mysterious villain vaulted out of harm's way.

"But I won't let you hurt my friends!"

The enigmatic figure didn't respond as, like the hands of a clock ticking forward upon being wound, time resumed.

"... help Terra and... huh?"

Aqua stopped midsentence as reality snapped back into motion. She couldn't understand what happened. One second, she was talking with Ven while standing next to Mickey. And the next, Micky was fighting some stranger. But the surprise didn't last long. Stepping in front of Ven, magic and light coiling around Rainfell when the enemy turned their attention in her direction, she steeled her heart at the disturbing darkness radiating from the cloaked figure's mere existence.

"Who are you?"

Her question faltered against the oppressive silence when the would-be assassin didn't answer, "Are you working with Xehanort?"

"Don't waste your breath, Aqua!"

He hadn't meant to lash out like that. Gosh, simply speaking so rudely to Aqua, even if he had a really good reason, made him feel awful. But there wasn't any time. It would take several minutes breaking down this guy's frightening array of temporal magic. Time they couldn't afford to waste. Because if this villain's ability to rewind time was anything like the one inside Ultimecia's Tome, it was only the tip of the iceberg.

"If this guy's here, he *must* be working with... look out!"

Before the warning reached her ears, Aqua stiffened at the presence rushing across the badlands.

A cold, hate-filled darkness desiring nothing more than death, misery and suffering.

Launching off her left foot, she vaulted backwards as Vanitas slammed his Keyblade into the ground. She flipped through the air, landing in a kneeling crouch moments before the once masked youth swung Void Gear, releasing a stream of fireballs, each tainted by enough darkness to make her heart crawl. It didn't stop her from deflecting the assault. It didn't interfere with her attempts at stopping Vanitas from swinging his Keyblade through her neck. But the antipathy etched upon the face peering through the shattered mask reminded her of another boy.

A cheerful, friendly boy who described meeting someone remarkably similar to Ryuko.

It had been a split-second lapse in focus. A metaphorical blink of an eye while Rainfell reached the apex of its swing.

But more than enough time for Vanitas to teleport through the darkness, reappearing behind her with his Keyblade swinging downwards.

Clang!

Only for Ven to appear in his path, Wayward Wind intercepting the lethal attack.

"Aqua! You and... ugh... Mickey take care of... that other... guy!"

Forcing the words between gnashed teeth, Ven ignored the maniac *giddiness* radiating from Vanitas, "I'll deal... with... him!"

"But -"

"Trust me!"

His muscles quivered and burned. But even so, Ven refused to let the personification of the darkness once part of himself, hurt his friends or anyone else, "I'll be fine!"

"I... alright!"

Aqua almost choked on the words. Her fingers trembled around Rainfell, the Keyblade resonating with the worry growing inside her heart. But the look in Ven's eyes, his determination and resolve, quickly scattered those negative thoughts to the farthest corners of the universe. How could she be so selfish? Maybe, at one point, he needed her protection, but Ven wasn't weak. He was strong. If he believed he was strong enough to stop Vanitas, she just needed to trust him.

"Mickey!"

Her breath emerged in pale wisps as, with a few breathless strides, she was standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the king, "Need a hand?"

"I sure could!"

Mickey nodded at the question that wasn't really a question, "But we need to be extra careful, Aqua. Beating this guy's not gonna be

easy."

"As if the odds matter!"

The sound of armored plates shifting against one another pressed against Aqua's heart. Her brows furrowed together. And a pale blue aura materialized around her body, chilling the air yet leaving Mickey completely unaffected, "Terra and Ryuko are counting on us! For everyone's sake, we need to win! So, that's what we're going to do!"

"Heh... you took the words right out of my mouth!"

Sweeping his Keyblade towards the enigmatic figure, an equally bright light shimmering from within Mickey's heart as he nodded, "Now let's show this fella who he's messing with!"

Original Version

[“Hah... hah... can’t believe... I forgot... rule number one...”](#)

Braig felt like complete shit.

“Don’t mess... with you... keyslingers...”

The pair of arrowguns trembled as he glared at the blue haired Keyblade Master. Damn it, keyslingers really didn’t know the meaning of holding back. Sure, there was *acting*. And then this. Because despite putting up a rather brave face, he could barely stand, let alone continue fighting. Every gulp of dry air burned his lungs. His uniform was covered with enough ice to freeze half of Radiant Garden. Frost bit at his fingertips, making it *real* difficult to keep the arrowguns from clattering to the ground. A trickle of blood oozed from his lips. It seeped from a gash on his forehead, pooling around the eyepatch covering the scar stretching down the right side of his face.

And yet, he couldn’t help but smirk.

“But you wanna... know something?”

It might have come across as more than a little shocking to miss friendship, but he wasn't scared. Not of her Keyblade. Or her scowl. Or hell, having his heart stolen. Nothing she could say bothered him. And why? Because no matter how hard she kicked his ass, smashing that fancy key of hers against his ribs and stomach too many times to count, Aqua wasn't a damn monster. Not like *her*. She was strong. He'd give her that much credit. No way could he ignore that. But even with magic and a Keyblade, she didn't have *her* inhuman regeneration or monstrous strength.

Which meant, even if it wasn't part of the old coot's plan, he still had a chance of turning things around.

"That just means I made the right choice!"

Aqua pushed off the ground hard enough to kick up a cloud of dust.

"Not if I stop you!"

She tuned out everything, including the frustrating thug's sadistic laughter. Enough was enough! After barely stopping the maniac from taking potshots at Ven when he couldn't defend himself, she refused to allow him so much as a moment's respite!

"Ah! Not so fast!"

Even though the keyslinger summoned that annoying translucent barrier right before his arrows pierced her heart and other internal organs, Braig wasn't *too* peeved. He might have felt a little disappointed none of his shots penetrated the damaged plating, courtesy of the geezer's monstrous strength, but beggars couldn't be choosers. Keeping the cheerful teen occupied was the plan, after all. Sure, things hadn't gone perfectly. The blood snaking down his face spoke *volumes* about how much he underestimated Aqua despite knowing how dangerous a pissed-off keyslinger could be.

But despite some minor setbacks, Aqua was trapped by her own magic. Unable to move so much as a muscle. It was irony as its finest.

Yet he didn't stop firing.

Not for a moment.

Because the instant he relaxed his fingers, the keyslinger would move, teleport across the badlands or something equally annoying. Like throw her Keyblade. And given what the *other* bitch pulled after chuckling her sword, he wasn't about to give miss friendship and sunshine any opportunity to include her personal touch onto that frustrating combo.

"You know, for a Keyblade Master, you're not very - what's the word - oh, right, *smart*."

Against the backdrop of Kingdom Hearts, Braig grinned at the keyslinger's souring expression. Maybe wasting magic attempting to break through her impenetrable barrier wasn't doing anything besides draining what remained of his strength. But after the last time he stuck his nose out for Xehanort, damn did it feel cathartic!

"You really thought I'd let you rush me like that? As if!"

Another salvo kept the keyslinger too busy saving her own butt to answer. Not like he'd listen to anything she said. Despite everything, he was in a good mood. No rainbow orbs homing towards his position. No streams of ice and water blasting across the ground. No getting headaches trying to keep track of little miss friendship as she cartwheeled, danced and basically skated. If the old coot wanted him to keep Aqua and the other snot-nosed brat from interfering long enough for Vanitas, or whatever that freak called himself, tagged in, that was alright with him!

As long as it didn't involve *her*, he was pretty much willing to do almost anything!

“Well, he wanted me to buy time...”

The emotional high didn't last long enough to settling into his heart. And after a few moments, his grin slowly faltered. What the hell was taking so long? Sure, thanks to that monstrous bitch he never actually *fought* Terra. But no way, not a chance, was the guy strong enough to take on Xehanort and Vanitas at the same time. It was impossible! Not even after succumbing to darkness! Something unexpected must have happened. Which wasn't good.

But hell, he'd already come this far. What was the harm of pushing things a little further?

“So, what do you say we try something -”

A strangled, almost petrified, cough forced its way from his throat when a familiar, oh so familiar, crimson light flickered against Kingdom Hearts.

His amber eye, part of the deal he made with the old coot, widened at the accompanying explosion that sent Vanitas flying halfway across the Keyblade Graveyard.

“No way! How the hell is *she* here?”

Independently of the man's panicked reaction, Aqua glanced over her shoulder. She was *tired*. Maintaining a barrier to fend off the unending barrage drained whatever remained of her reserves. It was taking everything in her heart to not collapse onto her hands and knees. Without fanfare, she allowed the technique to dissipate into shards of shimmering magic. Rainfell scrapped against the ground as her shoulders rose and fell with every gasping breath. And yet, despite everything, the slightest semblance of relief graced her heart.

“Ryuko?”

And with that name, primal terror gripped Braig's heart like a cold vice.

Eye widening, he stumbled backwards, almost tripping over a rock jutting out of the ground. But with an arrowgun falling from his fingers, Braig stared at the familiar figure silhouetted against Kingdom Hearts. No way! Not a chance! As if! The bitch was a goddamn monster! Nothing - and he meant *nothing* - could convince him to fight Ryuko! Not even the old coot threatening to steal his heart! If the geezer was so damn confident about his plans, *he* could deal with the bitch! As for him? He didn't know anything about the other keyslingers besides them believing they had some grand role to play, but he wasn't sticking around long enough to get caught in the crossfire!

"Screw this!"

Pivoting on the spot, Braig didn't bother snarking at Aqua before fleeing in the opposite direction, "The old coot can finish without me!"

"Wait!"

Aqua began chasing the horrible thug. But then she stopped, panting through clenched teeth as she stumbled a few more steps. As much as she wanted to stop the man, that wasn't *why* she'd fought him.

"Ven!"

Despite the heaviness dragging down her arms and legs, she pushed herself to her limits. Almost dry heaving from exhaustion, Aqua swallowed the bile in her throat, all while worried the man might return. But when nothing came, Aqua forced a relieved smile before collapsing onto her knees.

"A-Aqua?"

"Don't worry, Ven," Aqua gently cradled Ven, her breath visible as pale wisps upon the moonlight, "I'll help you! Let me just -"

"Need a hand?"

The unexpected voice caused her heart to skip a beat. Between gritted teeth, instinct nearly caused her to lash out, Rainfell drawing upon the last dredges of strength in her heart. All in order to protect Ven. But once she saw who was standing behind her, caution and fear vanished, giving way to relief.

"Mickey?"

"Sorry I'm late!"

Despite putting on a brave face in front of Aqua and Ven, Mickey couldn't help but blame himself. It was almost like Lindblum again. If he'd been only a little faster, maybe he could have helped Aqua defeat that uncouth ruffian. But just as quickly as doubt and despair wormed their way into his heart, he shook his head. No! There was no point worrying about stuff that's already happened! Everyone was counting on them to stop Xehanort! So, no matter how much the past hurt, he needed to keep moving forward!

"Oh!"

He chuckled from outright embarrassment before quickly hefting Star Seeker overhead, motes of magic, each glistening with alabaster radiance in the light of Kingdom Hearts, clinging to the Keyblade, "You should probably close your eyes. I'm still sorta working out the bugs. And... uh... it might be a little bright."

Aqua didn't think twice.

Twisting her head away from Mickey, she slammed her eyes shut. But not before throwing herself over Ven, shielding him from the immeasurably bright light radiating from Mickey's Keyblade. Its warmth was unmistakable. And although it lasted no more than a

moment, long enough for her heart to register something happened, a sharp crackle immediately caught her attention. A soft, almost relieved, gasp escaped her throat. Her hold upon Ven tightened. And as she opened her eyes, shoulders rising and falling with every anticipatory breath, she nearly cried upon watching the darkness-tainted ice shatter into millions of pieces.

“Ven! Are you alright?”

“Y-Yeah, just give me a second,” even though his armor absorbed most of the damage, Ven violently shivered. He could barely feel anything. Everything was numb. Yet he refused to relax. Not yet. Not until his friends were safe, “Thanks, Mickey. You’re a real life-saver!”

“Don’t mention it! After all, what are friends for?”

A grin worked its way onto Ven’s face, happiness that didn’t quite reach his eyes as everything snapped back into focus, “Hey, how did you find us?”

“Well, you have Aqua to thank for that!”

One more extravagant swish of Star Seeker and every cut, scrape and bruise on Aqua and Ven disappeared. The emerald magic not only healed their injuries but soothed their exhausted hearts while restoring most of their stamina. It might have been overkill. But they were his friends. And considering *who* they were fighting, the slightest weakness could turn a victory into defeat, “I’d been tracking Vanitas when the guy got the jump on me. I put up a good fight. But it wasn’t enough. If she hadn’t saved me, who knows what could have happened!”

Mickey found himself staring more and more at Kingdom Hearts.

Well, not *at* Kingdom Hearts. Rather, he was watching what was happening directly underneath Kingdom Hearts.

He might not have seen Ryuko for quite some time, but there was no mistaking her presence. Not only had she somehow arrived before him, which was amazing considering she didn't have a Star Shard, but something was different. He could feel it. And he smiled. Boy, now *this* was comforting! Since the day they met, Ryuko's heart had been weighed down by anger and guilt. She'd blamed herself for being too weak to stop Vanitas from dragging her world into darkness. And those emotions, no matter how many times he'd tried convincing Ryuko it wasn't her fault, had darkened her heart. Sure, she hadn't ignored him or walked away. She never shouted at him to shut up or told him to mind his own business. But no matter how hard he had tried to help, his words had never quite reached Ryuko's heart.

But now, instead of that awful darkness and negativity weighing down her heart, there was nothing but resolve and determination.

"Once I woke up, Donald and Goofy filled me in! That's when I knew I needed to help you guys, no matter what it took!"

Another flash of crimson light followed by the familiar sensation of darkness drew their attention, "And it looks like we arrived just in the nick of time!"

"Xehanort... he mentioned Ryuko."

Clasping a hand over her heart, fingers slowly clenching into a relaxed fist, Aqua frowned, "He said she almost ruined his plans. Do you know what he was talking about?"

"Well, if I had to guess, it's probably because Ryuko's the reason everyone's looking for him!"

Ven's head whipped from right to left, "She did what?"

"After she headed back to Alexandria with Satsuki, Ryuko told Master Beatrix everything she knew. About Vanitas. Xehanort. Well, pretty much everything."

Mickey considered himself lucky. Or maybe, extremely fortunate was a better choice of words. Yen Sid's anger was awful. And he would know. Well, not entirely. Sure, he might have foolishly worn his master's sorcerer's hat. But after rescuing him from his own mistakes, Yen Sid had been more disappointed than angry. But from the storm brewing around the tower after he woke up, which had caused the very air to become electrified with unbridled magic, his master had been equally concerned *and* infuriated with Xehanort.

"Which explains Xehanort's desperation!"

Still staring at Kingdom Hearts and the stormy clouds swirling around the forced manifestation, Mickey nodded vigorously before raising Star Seeker upwards, "It was only a matter of time until he was brought to justice. And so, as a last resort, he must have awakened the Cloud of Darkness from its eternal slumber!"

There was something about the name that bothered Ven.

Maybe it was exhaustion, but he could have sworn the name sounded awfully familiar. It was on the tip of his tongue. A memory almost like a faded dream. But no matter how hard he tried, he simply couldn't remember *where*, "The cloud of... what?"

"The Cloud of Darkness. An ancient and incredibly powerful Heartless."

Mickey tried ignoring the worry building inside his heart. But no matter how hard he pushed those feeling aside, they continued growing. Despite what some people thought, he wasn't naïve. There were lots of things that scared him. And the most prominent, not to mention fresh, was Ardyn Izunia. The man was a monster in every sense of the word. Even after using everything in his power, not just to survive but help Ryuko and Gilgamesh, it hadn't been enough. If it weren't for Yen Sid, things might have taken an awful turn for the worst. Which made the concern he felt *now* all the more bothersome.

He had the utmost faith in his master. After all, Yen Sid was one of the most powerful beings in existence! He *knew* Yen Sid and everyone else could stop the Cloud of Darkness before the delicate balance between light and darkness was permanently shifted. But that didn't diminish the worrisome feeling inside his heart, "Which is why there's no time to waste! Terra and Ryuko need our help!"

"Right!"

Aqua nodded, resolve glowing in her eyes, before grinding her heel against the dirt, "Ven, I'll distract Xehanort! While he's busy, you and Mickey will -"

[Time stopped.](#)

The words died within Aqua's heart as reality shuddered to a screeching halt. In the middle of reaching towards Aqua, bright light surrounded Ven's outstretched fingers. A small trace of his Keyblade, caught between indistinguishable moments of time, could be seen. Next to Aqua and no less caught off guard by the unsuspecting attack, Mickey's brow was unusually furrowed. But all of them, right down to the motes of dust around their feet, stood frozen inside a single moment of time.

A boot, flickering and translucent as if unable to determine whether or not it truly existed or was merely phantasmal, crunched against the ground.

Obscured by a form-fitting black coat, gloves and accompanying hood casting unnatural shadows across their features, a figure phased through the cracks of time. Each stride they took caused their existence to become increasingly 'tethered' to the current reality. Until, pausing some distance from the frozen trio, wisps of pale vapor visible against the light of Kingdom Hearts, the transparency completely dissipated.

Not a sound was audible as they raised their right hand, electricity crackling between their splayed fingers. A sense of *wrongness* filled

the air. Yet without a word, they angrily, almost passionately, clenched their hand into a fist, clasping the glowing ethereal blade as it manifested from nothingness and darkness.

As an identical sword materialized alongside the first, the mysterious figure's attention drifted. First moving from Mickey to Aqua, then to Ventus, before once more returning towards the blue haired Keyblade Master.

Quickly rotating their arms, ethereal blades grinding against each other before lurching to a halt, held in positions reminiscent of a clock's hands, the enigmatic interloper took a single breath before pushing off the ground.

The stomping left ripples throughout stopped time, kicking up clouds of dust that momentarily flickered before freezing between successive intervals.

Curling one arm over their shoulder while extending the other parallel to the ground, they sprinted across the moon-lit landscape, ethereal blades arcing towards the time-frozen Keyblade Master.

[“LIGHT!!!”](#)

Their head whipped towards Mickey when light *exploded* from the mouse.

Reacting quickly to the surprising development, the mysterious figure crossed the ethereal blades one over the other, intercepting the Keyblade before it reached their face. Hidden eyes widened at the attack. Shadowed features tensed when the mouse's physical strength proved excessive, forcing them backwards. Their boots skidded across the ground, driving deepening wedges through the dirt. Yet before their knees buckled, they pushed back. With a cross-wise counterattack, they drove Mickey backwards. And much too quickly for the normal heart to follow, they pushed the offensive.

Accompanied by the fluttering of their coat, they met the mouse's increasingly powerful strikes with their own. Dancing back and forth underneath Kingdom Hearts, sparks of electricity and light failed to illuminate the shadows underneath their hood. With one knee halfway collapsed thanks to an awkward step while their center of balance faltered sideways, they didn't panic. Didn't falter for a moment. Their boot smashed against the ground, heel digging into the dirt, before they lurched forward, ethereal blades extending into identical greatswords.

In a flash of moment, they stood behind Mickey, ethereal blades extended alongside the mouse's Keyblade.

Only to immediately collapse onto one knee, blood spewing from the open wound on their bicep.

But before the ethereal blade fell from their bloodied fingers, everything lurched to a halt. And then began rewinding. The blood pooling under their feet reversed directions, falling up instead of down.

Yet alongside a sound more akin to shattering glass than crystalline chiming, Mickey dispelled the esoteric temporal magic, leaving the figure momentarily *stunned*.

"Sorry!"

A certain harshness accompanied the singular word as Mickey pressed the advantage. Without giving the guy time to recover, he backflipped, both hands clasping Star Seeker as almost pearl-like light erupted from the Keyblade. Landing on the ground and immediately swinging the legendary blade, his normally friendly expression hardened when the mysterious villain vaulted out of harm's way.

"But I won't let you hurt my friends!"

The enigmatic figure didn't respond as, like the hands of a clock ticking forward upon being wound, time resumed.

They simply shifted into another stance, electricity crackling around the ethereal blades.

"... help Terra and... huh?"

Aqua's breath caught in the back of her throat. She couldn't understand what happened? One second, she was talking with Ven while standing next to Mickey. And the next, Micky was fighting some mysterious stranger. It seemed impossible. Temporal magic? But the surprise lasted only as long as successive heartbeats. With a resolved glower, she skidded in front of Ven, magic and light coalescing around Rainfell when the enemy turned their attention in her direction.

"Who are you?"

Her question faltered against the oppressive silence when the would-be assassin didn't answer, "Are you working with Xehanort?"

"Don't waste your breath, Aqua!"

He hadn't meant to last out like that. Gosh, simply speaking so rudely to Aqua, even if he had a really good reason, made him feel awful. But there just wasn't any time for detailed and exhaustive explanations. It would take several minutes breaking down how this mysterious villain's control over temporal magic was downright nightmarish. To not only stop time but reverse its direction? They couldn't afford wasting any more time. Because if this ability resembled the one within Ultimecia's Tome, what they already experienced was nothing more the tip of the iceberg.

"If this guy's here, he *must* be working with... look out!"

Even before the warning, Aqua gasped at the presence rushing across the landscape. A cold, hate-filled darkness wishing for

nothing more than death, misery and suffering. The distilled essence of everything Master Eraqus claimed needed to be eradicated. Something, or rather *someone*, she'd fought twice. Once alongside Terra and Satsuki. And once by herself, using nothing more than her inner light to stave off his immense and suffocating darkness.

Launching off her left foot, she vaulted backwards, lips pulled into a snarl as Vanitas slammed his Keyblade into the ground. Barely able to regain her footing when the formerly masked boy swung Void Gear, releasing a stream of fireballs, each tainted by enough darkness to make her skin crawl, Aqua flinched at the hatred radiating from his heart. It didn't prevent her from deflecting the magical assault. But the antipathy radiating from the exposed face peering through the shattered mask reminded her of another young boy. One she'd met on Destiny Islands.

A cheerful, friendly boy who described meeting someone remarkably similar to Ryuko.

It had been a split-second lapse in focus. A metaphorical blink of an eye while Rainfell reached the apex of its swing.

But more than enough time for Vanitas to teleport through the darkness, closing the distance with his Keyblade swinging towards her neck.

Clang!

Only for Ven to appear in his path, Wayward Wind intercepting the lethal attack.

"Aqua! You and... ugh... Mickey take care of... that other... guy!"

Forcing the words between gnashed teeth, Ven ignored the maniac *giddiness* radiating from Vanitas, "I'll deal... with... him!"

"But -"

“Trust me!”

His muscles burned. The darkness pulsing around Vanitas seemed intent on swallowing his heart. But even so, Ven pushed back with all his might. He wouldn't let this guy hurt anyone else. No matter what it took, “I'll be fine!”

“I... alright!”

Aqua almost choked on the words. Her hand clenched around Rainfell, the Keyblade trembling from the pressure. She didn't want to leave Ven alone. Her heart focused upon everything that might happen if Vanitas proved too much. But Ven's determination replaced those feelings with guilt. And against her conscious effort, she grimaced. How could she have been so selfish? This was Ven. He might have at one point needed her protection, but not anymore. He was strong. Almost as strong as herself or Terra. Maybe even stronger. If he believed he was strong enough to hold back Vanitas, she needed to trust him.

“Mickey!”

Her breath emerged in pale wisps as, with a few breathless strides, she was standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the king, “Need a hand?”

“I sure could!”

Mickey nodded at the question that wasn't really a question, “But we need to be extra careful, Aqua. Beating this guy's not gonna be easy.”

“As if the odds matter!”

The sound of armored plates shifting against one another pressed against Aqua's heart. Her brows furrowed together. And a pale blue aura materialized around her body, chilling the air yet leaving Mickey completely unaffected, “Terra and Ryuko are counting on

us! For everyone's sake, we need to win! So, that's what we're going to do!"

"Heh... you took the words right out of my mouth!"

Sweeping his Keyblade towards the enigmatic figure, an equally bright light shimmering from within Mickey's heart as he nodded, ["Now let's show this fella who he's messing with!"](#)

Last edited: Jan 29, 2019

Chapter 9.6

Well, here you go. Master Xehanort's fight against Terra and Ryuko. Which brings up an interesting question. I don't think he's actually fought seriously at any point in the series (ignoring Kingdom Hearts III... probably). Sure, you fight his younger incarnation and Ansem: SoD, Xemnas, Terra-Xehanort, etc. But his original incarnation? The only time you fight Master Xehanort is in Terra's story. And there's plenty of evidence to suggest he was holding back against Terra in order to buy time for Ventus to merge with Vanitas and forge the X-Blade. This is the assumption I made. And so, I went into this fight with a single thought. How would Xehanort fight Terra AND Ryuko? That was a difficult question. But I think I did a pretty good job.

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/b/b9/Opening_09_KH3D.png/800px-Opening_09_KH3D.png]

“HAAAAH!!!!”

A mixture of blood and spittle spewed from her lips as the searing flames smashed into her stomach. She gasped, excruciating pain rippling through her body. Disbelieving lips trembled in the instant before the concussive force sent her careening backwards. As the world spun around her body, Kingdom Hearts turning upside down and backwards, her shoulder smashed into the ground. It hurt like hell. Not the impact. Not the freaking embarrassment. But getting caught off guard by the asshole's sneak attack. And that anger... that mounting frustration building in her heart... devolved into a vicious snarl.

“You... bastard!”

Without so much as blinking, she stabbed the Scissor Blade into the nearest surface, lurched back onto her feet and *rushed* Xehanort. The fancy technique nearly yanked her arm out of its socket, but it

stopped her dead. Which was the goddamn point. Sprinting across the moonlit plateau without slowing down, Ryuko focused everything on the smug bastard. Snapping out of her hand, Threadcutter rematerialized alongside an intense flash of crimson stars.

In the blink of an eye, she was inches from Xehanort, streaks of vibrant crimson trailing behind the Scissor Blade and Threadcutter.

And then, as if rubbing her face into the freaking dirt, the asshole flipped over her head at the last possible moment, one hand clasped against the small of his back.

“Impressive, Ryuko.”

The smugness literally *oozed* from Xehanort’s heart as he landed in the exact spot she’d been standing, not a single hair on his bald head out of place.

“A little faster and you might have damaged my coat.”

Her eyebrow viciously twitched.

“Quit pissin’ me off!”

The words barely escaped her snarling lips before she pivoted on the back of her heel, Scissor Blade and Threadcutter swinging *aggressively* towards the hunched geezer. If he attempted to teleport, she’d track him down. If he flipped away, she’d run after him. If he fought back, she’d take his punches like a champ before returning each and every favor ten-fold. Because no matter what underhanded tricks Xehanort pulled out of his ass, he *wasn’t* leaving this world alive!

Ryuko nearly bit her tongue when the Keyblade Master caught both weapons against the edges of his Keyblade.

And then she *grinned*.

“Got ya!”

What she wanted to pull came from the seemingly bottomless folder of flaunting bullshit Satsuki kept up her freaking ass. Using her superior - no, scratch that - *vastly* superior strength to push Xehanort into taking their fight a little more seriously, Ryuko waited until the bastard was about to say something before flipping the Scissor Blade into a reversed grip. A bead of sweat trickled down her face as darkness pulsed around Xehanort. But pushing that obnoxious power to the back of her mind, she spat onto the ground, twisted her elbow and shoulder into position and *thrust* the Scissor Blade downwards.

Violently pinning the bastard's ominous Keyblade to the ground alongside an eruption of light and darkness that brushed against their collective hearts.

Or, at least, that had been the plan.

"Son of a - gah!"

Another fireball smashed point-blank into her unguarded stomach, sending her stumbling backwards, smoke rising from the burnt armored plating.

"It's impossible to truly disarm a Keyblade Master."

The flames flickering around No Name, now held in Xehanort's left hand, were almost obnoxious as he snuffed them out with naught but an errant thought, "Beatrix should have taught you better."

With only a modicum of physical strain upon his arthritic bones, the Keyblade Master spun around, No Name countering Terra's surprise attack. Something that barely stung his fingers but left the feckless youth's pride irrevocably shattered. The darkness writhing from the recesses of Terra's heart was potent. It pushed against his existence, seeking purchase where it wasn't wanted. But it was still too *weak*.

And so, when Terra recovered faster than anticipated, he effortlessly side-stepped the massive Keyblade, amber eyes shimmering at the darkness blasting forth across the plateau.

“Humph, your darkness is too wild, boy!”

Another carefully timed swing deflected the larger Keyblade. Spiraling through the air in lazy patterns, sparks and motes of burning darkness accompanied each clashing of their inner blades. A third confrontation pushed his boots into the dirt. Barely an inch of movement. The fourth left a small wound on Terra’s chest. By the sixth exchange, he grew aware of a faint pitter-patter. Something growing louder by the second. His eyes narrowed, then widened, while mirth pulled against his lips. Amusement danced in his heart.

Pushing once more against the opposing Keyblade before darting sideways, he allowed both youths to nearly crash into one another.

“I’m disappointed, Ryuko.”

He barely made a sound upon landing on the opposite side of the platform. Nothing more than the soft fluttering of his coat in the ethereal breeze. Grinning broadly, lips slightly pulled into a smug smirk, at Terra and Ryuko’s reactions, the latter responding far quickly than the former, Xehanort thrust two fingers upwards, “A *true* Keyblade Master wouldn’t have fallen for such an obvious trap!”

As if triggered by the condescending taunt, concealed Seeker Mines planted into the ground throughout the battle simultaneously detonated.

Only a few meters further from the epicenter of the magical explosions than Ryuko, Terra had barely enough time to heft Earthshaker into a halfway decent guard. At the moment both of his feet slid across the ground, shoulders lurching forward and Keyblade desperately clasped in his fingers, the rippling eruptions smashed against his prepared heart. Magical flames slammed against Earthshaker. But quickly drawing upon his darkness without caring

about the consequences, he bore the pain without complaint. It anchored him to the ground, allowing him to keep his attention focused upon Xehanort despite the nearly blinding light.

Ryuko didn't know what the hell happened.

The last few seconds remained mysteriously blank as her face smashed against the plateau. And instantly her memory returned. Heat. Pain. Explosions. *Xehanort*. As she smashed into solid rock another time... and then a third... she remembered everything. And with that hatred bubbling to the surface of her heart, she skipped over the edge of the cliff, her seemingly endless stream of curses fading into the darkness.

"Ryuko!"

Ignoring the searing pain radiating from his left arm and shoulder, burns covering his hakama and sleeve while blood stained the ripped fabric, Terra watched Ryuko soar over the edge of the platform before angrily launching himself towards Xehanort. With his teeth clenched, he rushed the fallen master. Darkness erupted around Earthshaker. Yet he found himself on the defensive. Fireballs. Razor-thin spikes of ice. Gusts of sharp wind. Bolts of lightning. Every conceivable school of elemental magic erupted from Xehanort's Keyblade. The magical volley was relentless.

All alongside the bastard's amused chuckling.

"Come now, Terra, is this truly the best you can muster?"

Still holding one hand against the small of his back, Xehanort grinned at Terra's frustration, "Draw upon your darkness!"

Through carefully manipulating the rate of magic buffeting Terra, he allowed the naïve teenager to close the distance between them. And just as anticipated, Terra used that opportunity to swing his Keyblade along a trajectory meant to shatter his collarbone while rendering

him immobile. A pragmatic decision. Yet before the Keyblade finished his arc, Xehanort swung upwards, callously deflecting the weapon.

“Use that anger and hatred to fuel your strength!”

As the sound of their clashes echoed across the platform, he blocked the next attack. And countered the one after that. And the subsequent strikes powered by darkness simmering within Terra’s heart. All without so much as the slightest difficulty. The boy was strong. Perhaps not as strong as Ryuko, but he lacked experience. His blows were straightforward. Each strike blatantly obvious.

Such an ignorant fighting style was almost insulting.

“Sate that lust for revenge!”

With yet another underhanded riposte forcing Terra’s Keyblade skywards, Xehanort hummed in the back of his throat, “Or do you intend on watching your friends perish, helpless as a newborn to protect them?”

“Shut up!”

Terra felt the power bubbling inside his heart. Anger. Hatred. Everything was coming together. This was his last chance. If he did this... if he took that final step... there was no coming back. Aqua. Master Eraqus. Ven. Experiment 626. Zack. And Riku. If he didn’t stop Master Xehanort, they, and countless others, would be endangered. An entire world had succumbed to darkness because of the fallen master’s insanity. And so, without holding anything back, he accepted darkness into the furthest depths of his heart, granting him the strength to defeat the bastard who already caused so much pain and suffering.

“What I do, I do for my friends! Not for power! Not for strength!”

Gritting his teeth, he slowly but surely overwhelmed the fallen master, “And certainly not for you!”

“A bold assertion!”

Exhilaration danced within Xehanort’s eyes at the darkness writhing around the youth, “But words alone won’t be enough to -”

“AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!”

In the background, an incredibly *pissed off* individual screamed at the top of their lungs.

[img:

https://66.media.tumblr.com/4030d1d9847266be1a4d019b969677b2/tumblr_o8zw1sqseE51ryachyo1_500.gif]

“SON OF A... !!!”

Ryuko didn’t give a shit about anything as she charged full-tilt up the side of the cliff. Her armor was partially destroyed. A trace of blood clung to her lips. Frustration bubbled inside her heart. Pumping one arm due to losing her Keyblade at some point between Xehanort booby trapping the freaking ground and falling hundreds of feet, crimson light screamed around the Scissor Blade. Power that twisted and turned. Tendrils of shadowy light pulsing against her heart and the solid rock cracking underneath her stomping boots.

“TAKE THIS!!!”

As much as Terra believe his newfound strength sufficient, Xehanort was perfectly capable of separating himself from the youth any time he wished.

But the intriguing darkness clinging to Ryuko’s enigmatic heart drew his attention. As the girl launched herself over the edge of the cliff, his eyes widened. But modest surprise quickly transformed into smugness.

“Humph!”

He shifted his right foot, heel scraping against the ground, “How utterly childish!”

It began as a small rumble but quickly escalated into a full-blow quake. And only first-hand experience was the only thing that saved Terra from Xehanort’s unprovoked attack. Grunting in mounting impotence at the ease in which the master cast high-level magic, he forced himself backwards, adrenaline flooding his veins. The earth trembled and shifted, tectonic activity rippling down the plateau to the ground hundreds of feet below. In the split-second before the ground cracked apart, pillars of rock shooting skywards with a titanic *boom*, Terra vaulted backwards, wincing as blood spurted from a gash on his left thigh.

“Tch! As if!”

Ryuko refused to back down and let some goddamn rocks stop her from kicking Xehanort’s ass!

Without slowing down, she pivoted mid-air. Latching both hands firmly around the Scissor Blades, fingers clenched tightly enough that her armor creaked, she shouted at the top of her lungs before swinging the crimson weapon with every scrap of power in her body. Countless chunks of stone, pebbles and other nonsense crashed to the ground as the Scissor Blade all but destroyed the crap standing between herself and Xehanort. Like a hot knife through butter, her dad’s secret weapon sliced apart the solid rock like it was nothing. Turning the magic into nothing more than millions of goddamn pieces.

But her lips nevertheless twisted into a snarl.

Because just like every other time, the asshole retreated into darkness at the first freaking chance!

“Damn it!”

After glancing back and forth, *hoping* the old bastard was hiding around somewhere, she flipped upside-down, twisted her center of mass and stabbed the Scissor Blade straight into the ground. God damn it! Everything about Xehanort pissed her off! Biting the inside of her cheek as the dust settled, showing nobody around but herself and Terra, she yanked the Scissor Blade out of the ground, "What sort of Keyblade Master runs away at the first sign of trouble?"

"You alright, Ryuko?"

Terra's concern about her health was confusing.

But once she felt the cold breeze on her skin, Ryuko glanced at her right arm. And blinked. Somehow, her armor was gone. Up to the shoulder, everything was missing. Yet even worse than that? Sure, it didn't hurt. Not nearly as much as it looked. But everything from her fingers to shoulder was burnt and bleeding. Enough that, if Mako were around at the time, she'd start worrying about death and stuff, "Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

A flick of her wrist returned Threadcutter from wherever the Keyblade landed after Xehanort knocked her over the side of the cliff, "But the same ain't gonna be said about Xehanort's ass once we're through with him!"

"Your fortitude is remarkable, Ryuko."

Xehanort afforded the discussion an appropriate amount of his attention. And thus, when they leapt away, instinct driving self-preservation, he merely smirked. Amber eyes widened in mounting amusement at their decision. With both hands folded against the small of his back, he swept his gaze back and forth. Alternating between the two Keyblade wielders. It would be foolish to allow their emotions time to settle. The heart was strongest - and weakest - in the midst of emotional turmoil. By drawing upon emotions for strength, one could accomplish magnificent feats. Yet, those very same emotions could shatter one's heart.

He needed Terra sufficiently enraged. The boy couldn't be allowed time to think. Anger, hatred and frustration needed to guide the youth's actions. And through those emotions, Terra would succumb to darkness. Fulfilling his only purpose for existence.

"If you'd been fighting Vanitas, that might have been sufficient to destroy that pathetic creature."

Why did you betray Master Eraqus?"

Terra trembled as the words hissed between his teeth, "He was your friend! Your brother! And you killed him! Why?"

"Betrayal is such a... *strong*... word."

A derisive scoff met the ridiculous question, "Even if I were inclined to explain my motivations like a naïve apprentice, they are not your concern. As we speak, light and darkness clash together! In but a few moments, the X-Blade shall once more be forged! And with it, Kingdom Hearts shall be mine for the taking!"

"You son of a bitch!"

Something inside Terra's heart snapped, "We won't let you hurt Ven!"

"So, take your nonsense about darkness and Kingdom Hearts and shove them up your ass!"

Ryuko spat the declaration right into Xehanort's smug face before snapping her arm forward, the Scissor Blade pointing straight between his eyes, "Because you won't have the chance to win!"

"Strong words..."

Darkness wafted from the fallen master's hand. His fingers twitched, arthritic joints moving randomly as No Name manifested from the innermost depths of his heart, "... but I'm afraid your pathetic resistance has starting to grow bothersome."

“Tch!”

Her entire body twisted as she pushed off the ground. With the corners of her mouth twitching, Ryuko curled her toes, Scissor Blade and Threadcutter spinning around her fingers. The powerful launch kicked up a cloud of dust. In the fraction of a second it took to nearly reach the old bastard, feathery hair rustled and swayed in the rushing wind. But her eyes widened when Terra exploded from an oozing portal of darkness behind Xehanort, Earthshaker swinging for the asshole’s neck.

Their eyes met for a moment.

And that was *her* signal.

While the sadistic geezer dealt with Terra’s surprise attack, she skidded to a lurching halt before pivoting sharply to the right. And just in time. Because she could almost *smell* darkness growing around Xehanort. She had front row seats to the bastard unleashing an unnerving wave of darkness that forced Terra off his feet. Her eyes narrowed when the freak pivoted on the spot, Keyblade already swinging in her direction.

“That ain’t gonna work!”

The Scissor Blade deflected each and every fireball, turning the surrounding platform into an explosion-covered hellhole. Heat and magic brushed against her heart as Threadcutter spun around her fingers. Crimson light clung to the transformed Keyblade, enveloping the entirety of its blade and handle. And arresting her forward momentum by smashing her boot against the ground, she twisted the waist, spat between clenched teeth and *threw* the Keyblade at Xehanort.

Which he avoided by leaning out of the way.

“Now...”

Her eyes never left Xehanort's psychotic smirk as the Scissor Blade shimmered underneath the majestic of Kingdom Hearts. Crossing one foot over the other, spinning tightly in place until she started getting nauseous, a defiant snarl accompanied the snap of her shoulder that *chucked* her dad's final gift along the same path as Threadcutter.

"... take this!"

She felt the pressure against her heart. A strange, almost familiar light. The wind rustled through her feathery hair. And faster than she could blink, the world shifted. Reality and gravity inverted themselves as she finished teleporting across the platform, streaks of crimson light trailing from her shoulders, hair and fingers. Instinctively grabbing Threadcutter, her fingers latched around the Keyblade before her other arm snapped outwards, catching the Scissor Blade.

And then sending the latter right back at Xehanort.

Only for the Keyblade Master to flicker out of existence at the last possible second.

"Damn it!"

Furious almost to the point of annoyance, she punched the ground. Stone and rock crumpled. Her unprotected knuckles ripped open, oozing blood. And snarling as the wounds stitched themselves closed, she cursed, "Almost had him!"

"He's getting slower."

It was barely noticeable. Nothing more than a drop of blood oozing down the edge of the Scissor Blade. But as Terra handed Ryuko back her weapon, something accompanied by what felt like an unfamiliar weight leaving his shoulders, darkness brushed against his heart. And then immediately disappeared, "Hey, how does Xehanort compare to Master Beatrix?"

Despite the embarrassment of fighting someone's evil grandpa, Ryuko found herself grinning, "For all his talk about darkness, he wouldn't last ten seconds against Beatrix! She'd mop the floor with him!"

"A somewhat accurate summation."

Hovering in the air above them, the treacherous master thrust one hand downwards, ["But Beatrix isn't here, is she?"](#)

The lightning crackling between his twitching fingers arced towards the ground. A cacophony of electricity and light noticeable across most of the wasteland. Although Ryuko managed to avoid injury by darting and dancing around the magic - and using her Scissor Blade to somehow dissipate whatever she couldn't dodge - Terra lacked her reflexes. For all his power and raw strength, the boy's speed was woefully inadequate.

"Humph..."

He watched, amusement and disappointment manifesting, the intense, yet not too powerful, magic overwhelm the boy's meager defenses. With a subtle grin pulling against his lips, he observed the bulwark around Terra's heart shatter. Forced onto one knee, hands clasping Earthshaker to better resist the convulsions wracking his body, Terra seethed, unable to properly articulate the suffering and agonizing pain temporarily defining his existence.

"You son of a bitch!"

Faster than the Keyblade Master should have seen coming, Ryuko launched herself skyward, Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade swinging from opposite directions.

Xehanort could appreciate raw potential and talent. But with each subsequent exchange, curiosity was tempered by modest bewilderment. Suspicion born not from annoyance or anger but

genuine interest. Despite her thin and nimble frame, Ryuko's physical power exceeded all expectations. Despite bolstering his own prowess through judicious usage of magic, every parry was angled in such a way to deflect the majority of her strength. To reduce the strain on his aged and arthritic bones to somewhat manageable levels.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Her speed and reflexes were superb.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Every second that passed without Ryuko faltering demonstrated *why* she garnered Ardyn Lucis Caelum's attention.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

As the Scissor Blade scraped against No Name before violently ricocheting rightward, Xehanort's eyes narrowed. In that brief moment of time between successive attacks, he transferred his Keyblade from one hand to the other. A bold risk. One that, perhaps, could have ended disastrously against a more seasoned adversary. But as anticipated, Ryuko's focus momentarily faltered. The Scissor Blade subtly shifted directions alongside the Keyblade in her misguided anticipation of an unexpected attack.

"Freeze!"

Crunch! Crack!

"Not a chance!"

The *instant* she felt some weird and crazy darkness brewing from Xehanort's heart, Ryuko instinctively pushed herself away from the bastard. Her blood-stained lips twisted into a tight snarl at the bone-chilling magic wrapped around his fingers. She wasn't stupid! And neither was Xehanort! He already tricked her once by switching his

Keyblade from one hand to the other. Why the hell would he think she'd fall for the same goddamn trick a second time?

["NO WAY"](#) I'm falling for that!"

Before the bastard could figure out what she was planning, Ryuko threw caution to the wind. The Keyblade Master was like Satsuki! Any plans were garbage! Which meant you needed to be random!

Lurching backwards while spinning tightly through the air, she snapped one leg outwards. Almost immediately, she felt something push against her foot. But it wasn't nearly enough to slow her down! She heard something shatter. But it wasn't anything belonging to her. With an incredibly *loud* crack, her boot smashed into Xehanort's stomach, breaking at least three of the bastard's ribs and sending him crashing back to the ground.

"So give up trying already!"

The words barely finished leaving her mouth before she flipped forward and launched herself straight towards Xehanort.

Smash!

Struggling within an overwhelming explosion of light and darkness, Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade slammed into the Keyblade Master's weapon. The ground visibly buckled under the master's feet. Cracks spread across the plateau, deepening with every passing second. Her fingers tightened around both blades when Xehanort's expression hardened. With blood trickling from the corner of his mouth, his eyes narrowed. Anger noticeable for the first time since she arrived.

"Concede!"

With nothing more than pure intent, flames of pure darkness burst from the ground underneath Ryuko's feet.

“Beatrix was wise choosing you as her apprentice.”

As the girl's smoking body crashed onto the other side of the plateau, Xehanort wiped the back of his hand against his lips. The crimson stain was mesmerizing. For the second time in recent memory, he'd been wounded. First at Eraqus's hands. And now Ryuko's. But instead of frowning, he smirked. Amusement, not frustration, graced his heart. Staring at the fresh blood staining his glove, his shoulders trembled. Soft laughter burst forth. And with a widening grin, emerald light healed his broken ribs, leaving both pride and body restored, “You're truly worthy of the title of master.”

“Oh my god, shut up already!”

Her breathing slightly ragged, more from frustration than exhaustion, Ryuko staggered back onto her feet. Clenching both hands tightly around their respective weapons, her increasingly vicious snarl hardened, “I didn't come all this way just to hear you ramble!”

“If you say so...”

Slowly, almost purposely so, he raised his Keyblade, pinpricks of Kingdom Heart's shimmering light reflecting off the darkened surface. With deliberate stillness, he corrected his aged posture. And narrowing his eyes, he glanced towards Terra, who was panting heavily despite healing his wounds, before turning the majority of his attention to Ryuko, “... however, do either of you intend on fighting seriously at some point?”

“Say what?”

Terra's breath hitched in the back of his throat as, for once, his anger outmatched Ryuko's almost reflexive response, “Nice try! But your bluff's not going to work!”

“Oh? You think I'm growing weary, do you?”

Gravelly laughter defined the Keyblade Master's response towards the boy's continued naivety, "Physically, perhaps!"

Arthritic fingers twisted around the ancient Keyblade bestowed upon him by his master decades prior to Terra's conception. Darkness thrummed from his heart, pulsing outwards with increasing power. His face twitched, one half curling in a half-smirk that unnerved Ryuko. And with their attentions occupied, *thrust* the weapon into the earth, "But a true master does not constrain themselves to a single school of combat!"

["No!"](#)

Terra *refused* to allow Xehanort enough time to cast magic.

As soon as the treacherous master thrust his Keyblade into the ground, he charged forward, pushing aside the lingering traces of pain. He panted. His teeth clenched to the point his jaw cramped. Darkness wisped around Earthshaker. After a single, agonizingly slow step, he gave himself over to the darkness. After the next, slightly faster step, the exhaustion constraining his movements dissipated. The world seemed clearer. Everything sharper. And in less time than he believed possible, he loomed before Xehanort, reality itself warping in his wake.

"I won't let you win, Xehanort!"

Clang!

Their respective Keyblades collided with an ear-deafening cacophony of burning darkness and resolute shadows.

Clang! Clang!

"Then demonstrate your strength! Give your heart over to darkness once and for all!"

Xehanort could hardly contain his excitement.

With sadistic amusement clinging to his heart, he 'surrendered' to Terra's assault. Each clash pushed him back a little more. Beads of sweat trickled down his face. Aged muscles and arthritic bones trembled. And yet, despite the exhilaration driving him forward, he grimaced with masterfully crafted annoyance. He purposely winced. Shifting one foot backwards, he drew his lips into a desperate scowl, confessing the implications that it was only a matter of time until Terra's strength and darkness proved too much for his own.

Clang! Clang! Smash!

As both their Keyblades slammed to the ground, edges locked together and darkness merging together, Terra stared straight into Xehanort's psychopathic eyes, "It's over!"

"Over, you say?"

Xehanort couldn't suppress the amusement bubbling within his heart, "On the contrary, I stand upon the cusp of victory!"

Right in the middle of Xehanort's gloating, Ryuko planted one foot against the ground, dismissed Threadcutter and leapt into the air. Her boots barely missed Terra's head. Rearing the Scissor Blade overhead with both hands holding onto the weapon for dear life, crimson light *erupted* from her heart.

"LIKE HE SAID..."

With a *metallic* clang, the hardened Life Fiber weapon reconfigured itself. Life Fibers extended and flexed. The center of the blade snapped outwards, almost doubling the overall length as it shifted into Decapitation Mode.

"... IT'S OVER, XEHANORT!!!"

Clenching her hands around the Scissor Blade until her fingernails were digging into flesh, she snarled viciously. Sharpened incisors dug into her lips. Feathery hair rustled and swayed in phantasmal winds. With one boot stepping onto thin air, ruby light *exploded* from the Scissor Blade, silhouetting the hardened Life Fiber sword against the magnificence of Kingdom Hearts.

“SEN’I SOSHITU!”

Last edited: Dec 1, 2018

Chapter 9.7

Sen'i Soshitsu's purpose in Kill la Kill was destroying Goku Uniforms through a combination of forward thrusts, slashes, slices, etc. It was Ryuko's go-to technique against Life Fibers, including the Original Life Fiber. But what about Kingdom Hearts? I thought about it. And after some time, decided to take what Ryuko learned from Beatrix (in other words, the light-based Seiken techniques) and apply it to the Scissor Blade in Decapitation Mode. It's the same technique she used against Satsuki in Episode 3, where it exploded beyond the Scissor Blade, up and down the walls of Honnouji Academy, back into the courtyard before everything exploded. Only here, the power is boosted by the light in Ryuko's heart.

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/6/61/Scissorblade.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20131225111916>]

"Hah... hah... hah..."

The deafening silence collapsed into a cataclysmic *boom* as existence quickly replaced the temporary vacuum.

As sheets of crimson light faded into nothingness, smoke and chunks of solid rock vaporized into fine dust already dissipating into the wind, the overwhelming extent of Sen'i Soshitsu's power was inescapable. Immediately from the Scissor Blade's razor-sharp edge stabbed into the ground, the plateau had nearly been split asunder. One half listed sideways and the other remained level, if somewhat unstable. It had been an attack so fierce the earth itself still trembled. A massive, powerful downwards swing that stretched into the darkness across the vast wasteland.

"Damn it..."

Even as she panted, mild exhaust weighing upon her shoulders, Ryuko listened to the unmistakable rumble of something crashing. Beneath her boots, the earth shifted. As if everything was a small shove from falling apart. But through clenched teeth, she forcibly yanked the Scissor Blade out of the ground, steam wafting from the glowing surface, "I missed."

"... hah... hah... ugh..."

No Name tumbled from Xehanort's fingers.

A drop of blood splashed against the fallen Keyblade.

And then another.

As the master's panting deepened, a light pitter patter of blood wetted the soil surrounding the blade. Disbelief etched itself upon his heart. Sweat dripped down his face. He gasped for air. But no matter how hard he pulled upon the strength of his heart, even calling upon the darkness itself, his decrepit body did not heed his orders. He could no longer move, let alone stand.

The chilling breeze brushed against his bare chest as he collapsed onto one knee.

"What... what power..."

Every article of clothing above his waist was gone. Shirt. Coat. Gloves. The magically-enchanted fabric had been torn to shreds by nothing more than the indirect aftershock of Ryuko's attack. It left him partially naked, exposing a surprisingly fit body for an otherwise arthritic eighty-year-old man. Panting heavily, he stared at the girl, searching for the inhuman source of her incredible power. If he hadn't forced himself free of Terra's grasp at the last possible second, shifting his center of mass while propping both hands against his Keyblade, he could have perished.

But as he clenched his shoulder, blood gushing from the debilitating wound cutting nearly to the bone, elation numbed the physical discomfort.

"It's over, Xehanort."

Turning a purposefully blind eye wasn't easy. In fact, he wasn't quite sure how he accomplished something literally impossible. And yet, Terra somehow found the ability to brush aside the Keyblade Master's half-naked state. That *wasn't* something he needed to see. Not now. Not ever. Instead, he focused on Xehanort's pained expression. That, not his nakedness, was more important. One move. Earthshaker rose an inch. He swallowed the lump in his throat. Injured or not, if the bastard tried anything, no matter the cost, he'd protect Aqua, Ven, Ryuko and everyone, "The X-Blade. Kingdom Hearts. You've lost!"

"Over... you... say?"

The naïve boy was silhouetted against Kingdom Hearts. Yet even out of breath, pain wracking his faltering body, Xehanort felt nothing but exhilaration. An emotion he masked beneath consternation. Terra's darkness was unmistakable. It was a testament to the youth's hatred and desire for power above all else. And with that thought encompassing his heart, he forced his expression into one befitting an ungraceful loser, "Not quite. I've come... too far... to..."

"I bet yer head's spinning, Xehanort!"

As whatever remained of her Keyblade Armor disintegrated into shards of light, Ryuko half-smirked, "Can't wrap your heart around it, can ya?"

Crimson light sparkled around the transformed Scissor Blade before the sword spontaneously collapsed upon itself. Life Fibers folded against one another. Sheets of hardened threading compressed and pleated until the Life Fiber weapon shrunk back to normal. And in the midst of the reversed transformation, her expression tightened. The

corners of her mouth twisted into an annoyed glower, "And who can blame you!"

Shifting herself sideways as Threadcutter materialized in her other hand, Ryuko spat on the ground, a semblance of smugness overwhelming standard irritation, "After years of plannin' in the darkness, getting your ass kicked right before winning must really suck!"

"Your power is fascinating. I'll admit that."

A trickle of blood dripped from Xehanort's mouth. But with one hand gripping his shoulder and the other too numbed to move, he was in no condition to wipe it away, "Time has sapped my strength. In my youth, this battle would have been over before it began."

"Aw, scared?"

Ryuko found the bastard's excuse almost laughable. If she wasn't so pissed off, she might have smirked. Because there it was. Someone claiming they could have won at their prime. Or if they hadn't been distracted, could have totally dodged her attack. She'd heard it all before. It was freaking annoying at Honnouji Academy whenever she and Senketsu finished wiping the floor with her sis's goons. And it was bullshit *now*, "I bet you're wondering how I'm so strong, right? Well, it ain't because of the Keyblade. Or even light or darkness or anything in between!"

She ground her toes against the dirt as a backdrop of light, awfully similar to Satsuki's yet lacking the authoritative nonsense, flared from the depths of her heart, "It's because everyone's counting on Terra and me to win! And we won't stop until your ass is buried in the freaking ground!"

A moment passed.

And the Keyblade Master chuckled.

It took a few seconds. Far longer than normal. But with some difficulty, Xehanort staggered onto his feet. For some inexplicable reason, he was *tired*. It had been years since he'd fought so vigorously. But his strength couldn't have faltered this much. Unless there was something else... something previously unknown... involved. As he laughed, realization overwhelming the annoying pain, blood continued dripping down his chest and arms.

"Ah, yes."

Unable to feel his arm, he wove what little magic remained into the bleeding wound and smirked through blooded teeth at Terra, "You intend to kill me?"

"You killed my master. You've hurt my friends. Ryuko's world is gone because of you."

Darkness wafted from Terra's heart, ebbing and flowing with every seething grunt. The purple-black miasma curled around Earthshaker and his fingers, rising in darkened streams that eclipsed the light of Kingdom Hearts. For what felt like an eternity, hatred and anger fought against rationality and morality. His arm trembled, keychain jingling from the pure physical pressure his fingers exerted upon Earthshaker.

To allow the bastard to keep breathing went against everything he'd sworn to protect. It was Xehanort who murdered his master. Vanitas was created by the Keyblade Master's psychotic unrelenting desire for power. Every terrible thing that happened to him and his friends could be traced back to Xehanort. Even if that meant never meeting her, if not for the treacherous master, Ryuko would be living a normal life with her sister and friends. She wouldn't have lost everything. She wouldn't have been forced to search the Realm of Light for everyone she cared about.

"But no matter how much it *feels* right, killing you won't change anything."

Earthshaker clattered to the ground, sliding a few inches across the dirt before stopping, "I won't give you the satisfaction of dragging me down into the darkness."

"Humph... pathetic."

Another cough wracked Xehanort's lungs. But beneath the frustration and anger burning in his eyes, he was completely calm. Serenity encompassed his darkened heart. Terra's lack of commitment wasn't unexpected. The boy believed Eraqus's teaching too much to simply throw himself into the darkness without regret. The only point of contention was not the boy's refusal to strike him down, but the enigmatic girl standing at his side, "Only now, when it's too late, have you finally opened your heart. Pity you've already played into my hands."

"What are -"

"Save the psychobabble for someone who cares!"

From the moment Xehanort opened his mouth, Ryuko could tell, right down to the freaking word, what the bastard was doing. She'd heard it all before. Over and over again. The asshole was pulling the 'I anticipated everything right down to which pair of pants you decided to wear this morning' speech. It was good. Really good. And it might have worked if Satsuki and her nerdy little friend hadn't used the same line back at Honnouji Academy, "Because like Terra said, killing you won't magically fix everything! It won't bring anyone back!"

Her grin turned downright vicious.

"But don't worry your ugly ass!"

The Scissor Blade rolled against her shoulder as she pointed Threadcutter right between Xehanort's cold eyes, "Once Beatrix's finished with you, you're gonna wish we killed you!"

"I find your confidence quite fascinating."

There was something intriguing about Ryuko's response. Perhaps he was simply indulging his own curiosity. Or perhaps, if only due to her constant interference, he was drawn towards the crimson radiating from her hair. An almost monstrous light that had grown stronger over the last few minutes, "You know, at times I find your insight remarkable, Ryuko. And yet you're woefully -"

"Blah! Blah! Blah!"

While tuning out everything spewing from the bastard's lip, Ryuko flexed her fingers around Threadcutter. One at a time, they cracked. The stiffness from getting smashed point-blank with searing-hot darkness was gone. And that meant there was nothing distracting her from Xehanort's boring speech. Jackasses like him never give up. Not now. Not ever. And certainly not on the verge of winning. He had to have another trick up his sleeves. They *always* did. It was either a desperate technique or a backup plan designed around their first strategy falling apart.

"Do you even *listen* to yourself?"

But that didn't mean she had to listen to Xehanort.

Go help Ven!"

Another person might start feeling tired from holding the Keyblade for so long. Someone else would feel exhausted after traveling halfway across the universe to sucker punch an insane asshole. But as her knuckles cracked another time, Ryuko lowered the Scissor Blade just enough that Xehanort's heart wavered right above the tip, angrily snorted, "I can handle things from here!"

"Are you sure?"

She audibly rolled her eyes.

"Thanks for the concern, but after all that blabbing, I'm not taking any chances!"

That was the freaking truth. She might be confident, making even a little too confident, but Xehanort wasn't stupid. Someone like him didn't come this far just to lose. He was planning something. She could see it in his eyes. Even with his shoulder torn to shreds by Sen'i Soshitsu, she could *feel* his darkness waiting for the moment they lowered their guards. It seriously pissed her off. The bastard still had another trick or two up his naked sleeves. Back home, she wouldn't have waited to kick his ass. But something was seriously wrong. She could feel it. So, until the asshole did anything, rushing to get a few cheap shots was out of the question.

Which meant falling back on a foolproof strategy.

"A guy like Xehanort never gives up and goes home."

With a shit-eating grin stretching across her face, she enthusiastically flipped Threadcutter around her fingers, "So, just to be safe, I'm gonna beat him unconscious with this Keyblade."

"I -"

"Trust me, I've dealt with freaks way worse than him," Ryuko still remembered Ragyo Kiryuin. In her nightmares, when she wasn't falling back to earth, Senketsu sacrificing himself to save her life, the bitch's laughter echoed in the depths of her heart, "I'll be fine."

"I... alright."

He couldn't begin describing the emotions inside his heart. The words simply didn't exist. All he could do was nod. Even if it was temporary, thanks to Ryuko, Xehanort was incapacitated for the time being. The technique she used... Sen'i Soshitsu or something... had torn through the master's defenses like they were wet paper. He'd moved away at the last second, but the backdraft from the Scissor Blade had been unlike anything he'd felt. Light. Darkness. And something else. He didn't know where Ryuko learned something that amazing, but its power was no laughing matter.

Maybe when everything was finished, he'd ask Ryuko about learning something that move himself.

"Hey, just do me a favor."

Ryuko blinked.

"What?"

Golden blocks flickered around his fingers as, with nothing more than renewed determination, Earthshaker manifested, "If it's not too much trouble, kick Xehanort's ass twice. Once for you. And once for me. After all, we can't be too careful, right?"

"Heh..."

With a menacing chuckle, the Scissor Blade slid off Ryuko's shoulder. In a well-practiced *swish*, the hardened Life Fiber flipped around her fingers. And in one fell swoop, she pointed it straight at Xehanort, "Sounds like a plan!"

He nodded before pushing off the ground.

Earthen light tinted by the barest traces of darkness silhouetted him against Kingdom Hearts as he took one step. Then another. And then another. Not once did he even so much as look at Xehanort. Even if the bastard was smiling. Because he could still feel them. Aqua and Ven were alright. And relief flooded his heart. No matter how many times the Keyblade Master attempted driving them apart, their friendship wasn't something easily destroyed. He didn't accept the darkness for power. Everything he did, he did for friendship. He'd sacrifice anything to protect everyone.

Something the traitorous master could never understand.

His resolve continued hardening until, as he reached the cliffside, prepared to leap into the artificial twilight, an overwhelming yet familiar darkness made itself known.

Eyes widening and heart shivering from the monstrous darkness, the tendons in his knee screamed as he pivoted just in time to watch a sword impale Ryuko.

Shink!

"What... the..."

Blood gushed from her mouth. It spilled forth from her body like a fountain, drenching the dirt and staining her clothes. It ran in rivers down the front of her stomach, pouring from the broadsword stabbed through her chest from back to front. Almost instinctively, she doubled over, thoughts swimming and heart racing a mile a minute, only for someone's hand to latch onto her shoulder. But before she could begin thinking about anything other than *murdering* the son of a bitch, the rest of the blade forced itself through her chest, earning another pained gurgle.

"Gah!"

She lurched forward, blood dripping down her chin. With a wet gurgle passing between gasping lips, her back arched from the sensation of phantasmal metal sliding through her internal organs. It released more blood that could possibly exist inside a human body. Thick puddles widened around her sneakers. Twitching fingers trembled under the agonizing pain wracking every fiber of her being. With her heart torn between torturous agony and white-hot rage, Ryuko couldn't help but notice Xehanort's bitchy relief. Or, more importantly, Terra desperately sprinting across the platform while screaming her name.

"... s-shit..."

Another glob of blood bubbled from her throat. She gasped, searching for air, before clenching her bloodied teeth. Hatred, boiling to the point it nearly manifested, engraved itself onto her heart as Threadcutter vanished. And with the Keyblade gone, she reached

up, latching her fingers around the broadsword using her body like a goddamn pincushion.

"... you... fucker..."

Only to sputter blood when the bastard twisted the blade.

"And a fine evening to you as well, Ryuko."

Ardyn Izunia considered himself someone of little importance. He cared not for the trifling matters of others. Nor did Kingdom Hearts interest him. He cared only for himself. And for those who dared stand in the way of his long-awaited retribution against his brother's descendants. With an expression betraying nothing but pleasant camaraderie, as if he was greeting a close friend instead of stabbing someone in the back, he clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, "If you recall, I promised to limit my retribution to you..."

He chuckled, an almost sadistic hiss, at the girl's continued resistance.

"AAAAAAHHHHH!!!"

With a breathless scream, the eruption of darkness blasted through her body. It exploded across the Keyblade Graveyard, instantly causing everyone on the world to turn upwards. The darkness tore through her chest. It disintegrated everything. And unlike last time, she was conscious for every agonizing second. As if the sadistic bastard relished her misery. The pain was unlike anything she'd ever felt. It took everything... literally every scrap of willpower... not to throw up her lunch or lose consciousness.

"Oh dear, still awake?"

Squelch!

A wet gurgle built in the back of her throat when Ardyn tore the sword out of her body.

"Hah... hah... fuck... shit..."

Falling forward like a puppet without its strings, she collapsed onto the ground. But at the last moment, she thrust one hand forward, stopping herself from completely falling. Grabbing fistfuls of dirt as her Life Fibers kicked into overdrive, she gasped heavily. She clenched her teeth. Blood dripped from her chin, momentarily wetting the dirt before vanishing into faint threads. Forcing one elbow underneath her body, Ryuko grunted at the unnerving sensation of each and every Life Fiber in her body stitching themselves back together. No matter how many times it happened, she'd never get used to it.

"Allow me to *clarify* something."

But when Ardyn kicked her ribs, breaking several while forcing her onto her back, she could do little but gag.

"Despite whatever misguided notions of betrayal are spiraling through your heart, I *am* a man of my word."

The unique weapon twirled between his fingers. First clockwise. And then counterclockwise. Yet, his grin wasn't focused on the interesting construction. The material, which for some peculiar and strange reason, was siphoning his magic. Draining him, for lack of a better word, of energy.

Clang!

With naught but a single backwards swing, he intercepted the feckless boy. Their blades colliding in the midst of the youth's passage through the writhing darkness. For a brief, if only amusing, second, the Keyblade wielder believed himself capable of standing against him. A notion painfully - emotionally, not physically - shattered when he was sent flying back the way he arrived. Completely unharmed, of course. A greeting, of sorts. Nothing more than a friendly gesture from one connoisseur of darkness to another.

"After all..."

Shink!

"GAH!!!"

The girl's screams were music to his ears. The painful agony evoked long-forgotten exhilaration as he knelt next to Ryuko, one hand rubbing his chin and the other holding the Scissor Blade lodged in her chest, "... you don't see me harming your friend now, do you?"

Chapter 9.8

As I've hinted, this is the end of Chapter 9. And let me just say, I thoroughly enjoyed every moment writing what takes place below. After discussions about Ardyn Izunia acting like an affably evil villain, having him come back into the picture and brutally show centuries of pent-up animosity and hatred towards Ryuko for interfering with his retribution was cathartic. And it's in-line with his actual personality. Some of you have claimed Ardyn is more of a long-term planner. And granted, he spent twenty or more years in Final Fantasy XV preparing Noctis for his plans. But when he was originally freed from his prison, the first thing he did was attack King Regis without hesitation. Which is pretty much what he did in my story. Because there's no way to fully describe the depth of his hatred for Ryuko.

[img:

<https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/finalfantasy/images/0/07/Ardyn-Episode-Ignis-Teaser-FFXV-DLC.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20170628183618>]

"Come on!"

Terra's eyes *snapped* opening as he flipped backwards, both feet landing on the ground with a solid crunch. Air magic wasn't his strong suite. But still, gritting his teeth, he moved with the powerful strike, streams of wind curling around his body. It was enough to arrest his momentum before he tumbled off the plateau. Gasping deeply, his heels hovered over the edge of the platform when he finally stopped. With a snap of his wrist, Earthshaker shimmered with powerful darkness, the purple-black miasma encompassing the Keyblade.

And then he watched, horror stabbing his heart, Ardyn thrust the Scissor Blade into Ryuko's chest.

"No! Ryuko!"

Darkness gave way to burning light as he kicked off the ground. Adrenaline flushed through his veins. Pivoting on his back foot, Earthshaker desperately grasped with both hands, Terra launched himself towards Ardyn Izunia. The warm and soothing light within his heart manifested as searing fire. Flames enveloped both his Keyblade and body, rising from his shoulders as an overwhelming orange-red cacophony of fire and heat. Silhouetted against Kingdom Hearts, he doubled his grip on Earthshaker, knuckles bleeding white from the pressure.

Only to feel *someone* approaching from his right.

Eyes widening, he threw himself sideways, briefly rolling across the ground before flipping back onto his feet, as Xehanort's Keyblade sliced through the air.

"Leaving so soon, Terra?"

A crooked smile pulled against the Keyblade Master's lips as No Name settled in his fingers. The distraction created in the wake of Ardyn Lucis Caelum's arrival had granted him ample opportunity to recuperate. Using what little energy remained in his shattered and broken body, he wove restoration magic into his shoulder. It still bled. His arm still refused to function properly. But he managed to staunch the majority of the bleeding. All while restoring some mobility and reducing the pain. Yet due to Ryuko's surprising powerful attack, his arm would never regain full strength.

Something which soon wouldn't matter.

"Our fight isn't finished."

Clang!

When the feckless youth launched himself forward with abandon, foregoing strategy in the process, their Keyblades smashed together. And in the ensuing struggling, Xehanort grimaced as his feet slid backwards. Sweat beaded upon his brow at Terra's growing power.

The boy's darkness clashed against his own, casting dark shadows between their blades. An unending struggle that illuminated his tanned skin and highlighted his soon-to-be vessel's anger.

["Ah, this brings back memories..."](#)

Standing betwixt unfolding history and the majesty of Kingdom Hearts, Ardyn Lucis Caelum - or Izunia, as he now preferred - smiled. A menacing admission of amusement. The boy's heart was full of darkness and untapped potential. The pale shadow was apparent. One which had grown stronger since Gizamaluke's Grotto. Given proper tutelage, there was no question the youth could reach wondrous heights. Yet his opponent possessed greater skill and ability. The darkness within the master's - Xehanort, if memory served - heart was tempered and potent.

Indeed, it was quite strong.

Although weakened by the inevitable mortality awaiting him.

"... an apprentice who wished nothing more than to help those less fortunate..."

His fingers tightened around the Scissor Blade.

If circumstances were different, he would have observed Ryuko drown upon the blood filling her lungs with gleeful exhilaration. Nothing would have brought him equivalent satisfaction besides doing the same to his brother's legacy. Yet he was no fool. On the contrary, he was exceptionally aware of the extraordinary situation. And thus, his grip on the unique and rather strange weapon hardened. For even with the Scissor Blade stabbed through her chest, puncturing one lung while scrapping against her beating heart, Ryuko still breathed. Nay, the girl was *recovering*.

Every second that passed... every heartbeat... and her agony considerably lessened. It appeared the esoteric material composing

her flesh and blood granted quite a bit of residence. One matching his own. Perhaps she truly was immortal after all.

Then again, judging by the way her bloodied fingers encircled the blade pinning her to the ground, he simply wasn't putting enough effort into the task.

"... only to be betrayed by those he believed had his best interests at heart."

Grinning broadly at the Keyblade wielder's venomous expression, he shifted the crimson blade back and forth, eliciting a strained grunt, "Tis a shame, really, his story lacks a fairy tale ending."

"You... bastard!"

Blood dribbled from Ryuko's mouth as she tried exploding Ardyn Izunia with her freaking mind. As a cough wracked her lungs, spewing more blood onto the ground, she cursed under her breath, "I'm gonna... kill you!"

"Ah, even when facing certain death, your heart knows not despair."

Affording the girl nothing more than a token of his appreciation for her continuing resistance, he uncurled his fingers, resting the palm of his open hand against the Scissor Blade, "The mark of a *true* Keyblade Master."

"Fuck... you..."

The crunch of dirt underneath his boots punctuating the girl's mounting indignation. And yet, gently pulling his fingers away from the Scissor Blade one by one, allowing the sword to remain lodged in her convulsing chest, a curious thought manifested in the deepest recesses of his heart, "I suppose you're curious about my, shall we agree, unfortunate timing."

Spittle and blood mixed into a vibrant foam as Ryuko grabbed the Scissor Blade, "Shut the... hell... up!"

"It's my fault, really."

He could sense the venom simmering inside Ryuko's heart. It was as he knew. The girl's darkness was fathomless. Perhaps - nay, likely - greater than anyone other than his own. If she were to fall into darkness, there was no telling what might manifest. But almost as if subconsciously aware of his mockery, she refused to give into anger and hatred. They still existed within her heart. The emotions etched themselves upon her snarling visage for all to see. Yet her heart remained incorruptibly strong.

But her resilience was not of any great importance in the grand scheme of things.

"Things were just so... *chaotic*... the details slipped my mind. Sorry about that."

With naught but a callous flick of his wrist, darkness manifested down the center of the plateau. Burning shadows ensuring the boy and Keyblade Master, for better or worse, could not come to her aid. Something the girl realized as he glanced sideways, amusement pulling upon his lips, "If you want, we could talk about it. What say you, Ryuko? Are you in the mood for some friendly banter?"

Squelch!

"I said... shut up!"

With a sickening *squelch* of Life Fibers slicing against flesh and blood, Ryuko yanked the Scissor Blade out of her stomach. As blood dribbled from the corners of her mouth, she tossed the sword onto the ground, teeth gnashed from the pain. But sheer determination pushed the awkward feeling to the back of her mind. Thanks to dear old mom putting Life Fibers into her body, the gaping wound was already stitching itself shut. Sure, it didn't do anything about the torn

jacket and shirt exposing most of her breasts, but it was better than running around with a massive hole in her gut.

"Because I'm getting sick..."

Grasping the dirt between her fingers, she rolled over, blood still smearing her chin and lips. An intense cough wracked her lungs. She spat up blood that didn't leave her mouth before reabsorbing itself. And slowly but surely, her hand shifted closer and closer to the Scissor Blade, "... of your lying!"

"On the contrary, Ryuko..."

To her frustration, standing underneath Kingdom Hearts with arms open, the patronizing bastard had the audacity to sound insulted.

"... I spoke nothing but the honest truth."

"BULLSHIT!!!"

Maybe her regeneration was working overtime - or maybe she'd gotten so goddamn pissed off she'd circled back to tranquil fury - but she felt better. Loads better. Even the unnerving sensation of the Scissor Blade wriggling inside the guts was a faint memory. Life Fibers might be bullshit. But they were *her* bullshit. Nobody could ever take them away from her! And with the light from her heart growing exponentially brighter, she latched her fingers around Scissor Blade and angrily launched herself towards Ardyn, Threadcutter reappearing in her other hand along the way.

"THEN WHAT THE HELL WAS ALL THAT SHIT ABOUT KINGDOM HEARTS, HUH!?"

Her arm twisted awkwardly when the bastard deflected the Scissor Blade, causing the ruby light enveloping the hardened Life Fiber weapon to ricochet across the plateau. Still floating several inches above the ground, one knee bent and her upper body shifting forward, Threadcutter spun around her fingers before swinging

downwards. A powerful slice that went wild as Ardyn, with a manic grin across his face, shifted himself sideways.

"Hurk!"

In response, a modest broadsword cleanly severed her shoulder down to the bone.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Ducking and spinning around the darkness-covered blade trying to pierce her into a shish kabob, Ryuko winced at the blood splattering the ground. Even as her body regenerated, the asshole was making her life a living hell. Her breathing hastened. Sweat dripped down her cheeks as she shifted into overdrive, moving fast enough that she began reacting instinctively instead of thinking about things. And through widening eyes, every detail of the twin swords, one bearing the emblem of a lion's head and the other a full moon, replacing the bastard's bloodied broadsword, she redoubled her efforts, Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade turning into crimson and gold blurs.

Each impact sent waves of light and darkness shooting across the twilight landscape.

Threadcutter swept in front of her eyes, deflecting the slightly shorter of Ardyn's twin swords. Something that nearly knocked the Keyblade from her fingers. And when her hand moved away, the bastard was holding a double-handed lance. An intricate, almost obnoxiously so, glaive emblazoned with several designs she'd seen throughout Lindblum. With a malevolent smirk plastered across his face, he sidestepped the Scissor Blade and Threadcutter, both of which arced towards his heart from opposite directions.

Squelch!

Excitement pulsed through Ardyn's heart as he skewered the girl through the stomach before viciously swinging sideways.

"GAH!!!"

A wound that regenerated as soon as his glaive finished slicing through her body.

"Shit! I'm not FINISHED YET!!!"

The annoying pain didn't even register on her mind. Or rather, she didn't feel *anything* besides the overwhelming desire to kick Ardyn's patronizing ass! Momentarily lurching backwards as her Life Fibers stitched themselves together, Ryuko stomped a sneaker against the ground. With a sharp pivot, the light from her feathery hair matching the intense radiance around both Keyblade and Scissor Blade, she *blasted* across the landscape towards Ardyn Izunia.

Crumpling... then *shattering*... solid rock in her wake.

Threadcutter intercepted the katana before the razor-sharp blade pierced her throat. Back and forth, again and again, all in the blink of an eye, she threw herself at Ardyn. And for just a second, the bastard's expression changed to something other than condescending smugness.

She pushed away from Ardyn when a massive greatsword switched places with the katana. Grinding her sneakers against the dirt when the bastard darted closer, she desperately launched herself backwards, hissing as the stupidly-large weapon missed by the skin of her goddamn teeth.

Only for the accompanying and *invisible* darkness coating the greatsword to slice open a thin cut along her cheek.

"It's as I said..."

Smash!

Pivoting faster than her eyes could track, Ardyn smashed an oversized mace against the Scissor Blade. Immediately, her arm buckled, the bastard giving Ragyo Kiryuin's own monstrous strength a run for its money. Several bones in her fingers shattered under the tremendous pressure. Her eyes widened. Spittle dribbled down her chin from between clenched teeth. And yet, alongside the freak's mocking chuckle, everything failed at once. Her muscles gave way. The ligaments in her shoulder tore. Her right ankle twisted out of place.

"Shit!"

Forced off her feet, she tumbled shoulder over shoulder across the platform, blood and spit spewing from her lips. Momentum slammed her forehead into a small rock jutting out of the ground.

"Hah... hah... damn it!"

The smell of burning rubber filled her nose as she stopped inches from the edge of the plateau. Blood tickled down her face, oozing branching paths between her eyes and down both of her cheeks. The pitter patter of blood grated against her ears. Breathing heavily, bloodied shoulders rising and falling with every panting gasp, Ryuko stabbed the Scissor Blade into the ground next to her sneaker, eyes *glaring* at the bastard standing tall like he was taking a walk through the park.

"If the man were to claim Kingdom Hearts for himself, retribution against the regent would indeed be impossible."

His boots crunched against the ground. Heel first, then the sole. Intimately aware of the darkness touching upon his heart, he slowly marched towards the Keyblade wielder. Every step further darkened the landscape. Shadows lengthened as his features twisted into a daemonic mockery of mortality. Darkness oozed from his mouth and eyes as the former stretched into an unnerving expression. His skin

paled to a deathly alabaster matching the hatred born through centuries of imprisonment.

And thus, with his true emotions on display for all to see, an extravagant broadsword, the emblem of Lindblum engraved upon the cross-guard, manifested in his waiting fingers. Which heralded his sudden appearance inches from the girl.

Squelch!

"GAH!!!"

Blood splattered across the front of his trench coat and favorite mantle. It dripped profusely from the other end of the broadsword, falling upon the ground with a constant yet charming pitter patter before, to his intrigue, the fluid which had yet to fall reversed course. Against common sense, precluding even *his* regenerative capabilities, the blood still coating his blade reunited with the girl.

All before he'd considered removing the blade from her convulsing stomach.

"Which would be a problem."

Latching his other hand around her throat, he forcibly separated weapon from flesh with a satisfying *squelch* of glistening blood upon metal. The girl tried cursing. Oh, she *tried* doing so. But the pressure prevented any such unwarranted sounds.

"For more reasons that you could possibly know."

Ryuko had barely enough time to realize Ardyn was still talking before her head *smashed* against the ground.

Another fount of blood spewed from her lips. Her back arched off the ground as the impact sent cracks splintering across the plateau. The magically upheaved structure trembled. Rocks fell from the edges towards the badlands far below. Yet, she snarled. Then sneered.

Before finally refusing to show the slightest hint of weakness. With her fingers reaching towards the Scissor Blade, scraping the dirt until the familiar metal rested against the palm of her hand, light enveloping the sword as she swung with all her might.

Only for the asshole's ice-cold fingers to latch around her wrist.

"[Throughout my imprisonment, I remained conscious.](#) Aware of the world. My lungs burned but I could not breathe. My mind screamed but I could not move. I begged for the embrace of death, yet my brother ensured not even *that* would come."

Ardyn slowly increased the pressure around Ryuko's throat, earning more than a satisfactory choked sputter, "Oh, you have *no idea* how long two thousand years can be, Ryuko. It's an eternity. And I spent every... waking... second contemplating revenge. The moment I escaped, Garland's descendants would suffer endless torments. The world he sacrificed himself to protect would be torn apart by darkness. His people... *his people*... would transform into a ravaging horde, one guided by naught but instincts to spread fear and death across the infinite cosmos."

A hiss carried the hatred within his heart as he leaned forward, "I shan't allow *anyone* take that pleasure away from me."

"Cry me... a river..."

Ryuko choked on the blood in her lungs as she forcibly shut the bastard down. Goddamn it! Great! Just what she needed to hear! As if getting her ass kicked wasn't bad enough, the guy was preaching his freaking backstory! A sob story meant to make her empathize and other stupid crap! She'd rather Ardyn continue strangling the life out of her lungs. Because thanks to dear old mom, it wouldn't work. Probably. Her and Senketsu's last fight with the bitch demonstrated she didn't really need to be breath. At least, in space. And when wearing Senketsu and all the other Goku Uniforms and Junketsu.

But *anything* was better than listening to the bastard's life story.

"If you that... freaking upset... go kill Xehanort!"

Against her expectations, Ardyn grinned, "A pointless suggestion considering the man's attempt was doomed from inception."

Her heart skipped a beat.

"W-What?"

"A clash between pure light and darkness. One no stronger than the other," Ardyn basked in her confusion. Ah, and there it was. Propping an arm against his knee, he released Ryuko's wrist without a second thought, aware of the turmoil wracking her monstrous heart, "I suppose a Keyblade could manifest from such a union, forced or otherwise. But it wouldn't be *the* X-Blade."

Apathetic indifference granted him singular motivation as he released the girl's throat, allowing her opportunity to catch her breath. As she coughed and wheezed, filling her nonexistent lungs with air, he purposely turned his back upon the Keyblade wielder, "Thus, no matter how hard he tried, Kingdom Hearts would not submit to his desires. It would remain tantalizing close..."

He reached upwards, fingers surrounding the oh-so-familiar object looming over the world, "... yet impossible to grasp."

"YOU SET ME UP!!!"

How could she have been so stupid? She'd known from the moment he opened his freaking mouth he was screwing her, yet she still let him bite her goddamn hand! Any other time, she would have immediately punched herself in the face. And *then* order Satsuki, Mako and everyone else within earshot do the same! But right now, only one thing was on her mind. And with that said, she launched herself at the freak, light streaming behind Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade as they spiraled through the air.

Only to be dragged back to the ground when chains of darkness wrapped around her arms and legs.

"What the hell?"

She struggled. Before the first trace of darkness wrapped around her wrists, Ryuko pulled upon the intense light granting her heart power. Using every last scrap of physical strength in her body, she flexed her arms. But no matter how hard she tried, the chains didn't so much as budge, "Get these things off me!"

"Indeed, I *may* have forgotten a few details..."

The sheer *hatred* wafting from Ardyn froze the blood in her veins, "... but that shall be the least of your concerns."

"Say what?"

"You've done well concealing your true nature, Ryuko. Much like me, you share the gift of immortality," his voice was like someone's nails dragging down a chalkboard. Gnashing her teeth when he pressed his boot against her stomach, the pressure enough to nearly force the air from her lungs, she coughed as he continued, "If only your so-called friends knew what you truly were..."

Primal *fear* stabbed Ryuko deep in the heart.

"Stop! Don't -"

Darkness writhed around Ardyn's fingers as he held his hand above the struggling girl's chest, "[Now, let's see what lies beneath your veneer of humanity.](#)"

"AAAAAAHHHHHH!!!"

An intense spasm wracked Ryuko as her back arched off the ground, spittle flying between her lips, arms and legs straining at the darkness holding them down. It felt as if her existence was being unraveled one thread at a time. She couldn't think. She couldn't

breathe. She couldn't scream. Every fiber of her being burned with unending pain. All she could do was watch helplessly as the bastard's darkness wriggled inside her chest for something it had no right to touch.

"Oh? Still fighting, are we?"

He admired the girl's unwavering persistence. He truly did. Not everyone could remain conscious as their heart was separated from their body. Yet throughout the centuries, he couldn't remember anyone's heart *resisting* the process. At least, to such an unexpected extent. It was boldness that elicited a modicum of respect. A brief, if somewhat smug, chuckle. And then darkness burst forth from his own blackened relic of a heart. More than enough to garner the attention of those fighting beyond the shadowy flames at his back.

It took time. But soon, much to his exhilaration, her eyes turned dull. And floating above her body, shimmering with intense crimson radiance that dissipated the natural darkness, was the girl's heart. Its magnificence nearly tore the breath from his lungs. Floating above Ryuko's stilled corpse, the heart pulsed with eldritch power. Intense ruby light and incompressible darkness existed side by side.

A paradoxical manifestation that plucked at his curiosity.

Squelch!

Out of nowhere, crimson threads wrapped around the extracted heart and *yanked* it back into Ryuko.

"What?"

For the first time in centuries, Ardyn was baffled. Staring into the girl's vacant eyes, he saw nothing. There was not a trace of life in her heart. Yet the ground trembled. Pebbles quivered around his boots. A growing and incomprehensible darkness whispering upon his mind. It electrified the air. Shadows deepened and the light from Kingdom Hearts appeared to briefly fade. Yet something else drew

his gaze. Taking a cautious step away from the girl, he watched, slightly mesmerized and mouth opening and closing, her heart's counterattack. Crimson light pulsed around her body. It flickered and twisted, stars twinkling within the growing and intensifying radiance.

It was akin to someone casting a point-blank Ultima.

With his eyes slightly widening, prefaced by naught but an intense strangeness whispering against his heart, blood-red light exploded from Ryuko.

["... ugh!"](#)

The *light* pushed him backwards. His boots dragged along the ground, leaving divots in their wake. Through narrowed eyes, mouth twisted into a sneer, he felt the darkness composing his body struggling against the intense illumination emerging from the girl. It was an outpouring visible across the entirety of the world. A stanchion of brilliant crimson light stretching towards Kingdom Hearts. And before his disbelieving eyes, the primordial aspect of existence tinted red. A change in coloration that quickly infested across the darkened heavens until only the horizon remained unaltered.

"Even now... standing upon death's embrace... you resist?"

Despite the unexpected development, nothing but contempt for the Keyblade wielder filled his misshapen heart. Having lost his fedora in the original blast, his purplish-red hair rustled as he pushed through the physically powerful light. First one step. Then another. All while being forced to shield his eyes, lest they be momentarily stricken blind by the overwhelmingly bright radiance. An uncharacteristic wince escaped his throat, emerging as something akin to an animalistic hiss as a majestic broadsword manifested in his outstretched fingers.

"So, to think *that* is the source..."

And then, standing upon the brink of retribution, he saw them.

"... of your power?"

The revelation gave him pause. If only momentarily, his expression softened, amazement replacing disdain. For inside the chaotic light streaming from the girl's heart, flickering on the periphery of reality, were a pair of multicolored eyes. Orange, red and yellow eyes manifested within the overwhelming radiance. Almost involuntarily, he seethed. A sharp hiss of cold air. He found himself unable to move forward another inch. As he gazed into the abyss that was Ryuko Matoi, the creature stared back. And then, and only then, he realized the startling truth.

It was *protecting* the Keyblade wielder from his retribution.

Yet in contrast with her monstrous darkness, he could only feel an equivalently strong light.

With his features twisting further until his form was naught but darkness manifested into the guise of a man, Ardyn pushed against the eldritch presence. An unwanted presence whose heart - yes, he *felt* the creature's heart - was eerily similar, if not identical, to the girl's.

"But make no mistake! It shan't be -"

Crimson light *blanketed* the plateau before the words finished leaving his mouth. Waves upon waves of undulating radiance washed against everything. The crackling flames separating them from the other Keyblade wielders collapsed underneath the twinkling effulgence.

Hundreds of feet below, breathing heavily and bleeding from several wounds, the mysterious stranger glanced upwards, mild bewilderment in their concealed eyes.

Aqua and Mickey, equally injured yet determined to help Ryuko, Terra and Ven no matter what, stiffened as Ardyn Izunia's monstrous darkness disappeared within the powerful crimson light.

"What? Is that... Ryuko?"

Ven found himself having little time to stare into the powerful light or wonder why Kingdom Hearts, or even the entire night sky, turned bright crimson. Or begin questioning why that nightmarish darkness felt so familiar. He twisted sideways, one leg crossing in front of the other, as Vanitas attempted taking him off-guard. For a moment, he floated midair, arms and legs hovering above the ground. And as Vanitas turned around, hate shimmering within those monstrous amber eyes, he swung Wayward Wind, slicing clean through the manifestation of his darkness's shoulder.

And Ardyn Lucis Caelum, standing point-blank in the explosion of light, disintegrated into nothingness, one hand still reaching towards Ryuko.

"I-Incredible!"

Xehanort was *speechless*.

Or nearly so.

Breaking away from Terra, one hand covering his eyes, the Keyblade Master observed Ardyn Lucis Caelum's destruction with child-like exhilaration. As the crimson light surrounding the girl faded into obscurity, its purpose fulfilled, a laugh tore its way out of his throat. He'd never witnessed anything so wondrous! It took his breath away! Even in his wildest dreams he never anticipated Ryuko's heart to harbor such fascinating secrets!

"Simply incredi - ugh!"

The sensation of Earthshaker slicing into Xehanort's back meant *nothing* to Terra as he pushed the heavily injured Keyblade Master

out of his way.

"RYUKO!!!"

Terror flushed through his heart when the magically upheaved plateau, already unsteady thanks to Ryuko's Sen'i Soshitsu, splintered down the middle. Boulder-sized chunks larger than himself collapsed to the ground below. He struggled for balance as part of the platform listed sideways, breaking apart in the process. Yet he didn't give up. He didn't stop running. And when that became impossible, he slid forward on his stomach, heart beating heavily in his ears as he desperately reached for Ryuko's hand.

Only for his fingers to grasp nothing but air.

"RYUKO!!!"

She was falling.

[img:

https://66.media.tumblr.com/64f4c1be083d4d8ed66dbcd11fc03483/tumblr_phon3gtEBH1se015qo2_540.gif]

Even after nearly losing her heart, a strong crimson light flickered within Ryuko's chest. Teetering on the edge of unconsciousness, her fingers twitched. Her lips opened. The sensation of falling hundreds of feet caused her feathery hair to violently sway. Through dulled eyes, she noticed Kingdom Hearts hovering in the sky. Somewhere far above, she could hear Terra shouting her name. But she couldn't move. She couldn't think. All she could do was fall. And yet, just as darkness overwhelmed everything, an intimately familiar presence touched her heart.

"Ryuko..."

Chapter 10.1

After watching the (likely) final trailer before Kingdom Hearts III is released, I was stricken with ideas. Quite a few of them. As I normally am when confronted with new information. Scala ad Caelum, for instance, threw quite a bit of chaos into things. Another world for Keyblade wielders? I have ideas on what to do, but they can wait until the game is finally released. Luckily, since I purposely didn't go into Xehanort's backstory, I don't need to rewrite anything. Which could have been a problem. And yet, I'm mildly amused that, through nothing more than coincidence, the supposedly final world in Kingdom Hearts III shares the same name with Ardyn Lucis Caelum.

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/0/0f/Dive_to_the_Heart_%28Art%29.png/427px-Dive_to_the_Heart_%28Art%29.png]

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 10 - Mr. Blue Sky

[She was falling.](#)

Everything felt strange.

Almost like a dream.

And the darkness...

As awareness and consciousness returned, one after the other, pushing away the numbness coursing through her arms and legs, Ryuko slowly opened her eyes. It felt like she was falling through water. High above, twinkling on the outer edges of her vision, faint sunlight penetrated the darkness. Leaning her head back as her vision spun in circles, she resisted the desire to close her eyes. She felt weak. Exhausted. Like she'd been vigorously sparring with Beatrix or Steiner. But something felt different. A strange feeling

pulsing within her heart, drawing attention to the whispers echoing from the surrounding darkness.

"What happened?"

She couldn't remember anything before finding herself falling through the darkness. Not a damn thing. No, that was wrong. There was one memory. One final recollection. She'd been fighting Ardyn after the bastard stabbed her in the back while Terra finished kicking Xehanort's ugly ass. But after that? Holding a hand over her chest, her eyes widened when something shifted in the darkness. It spun her around. Without resisting, she swam with the currents. It pulled her downwards, further into the depths of her heart.

And that's what she saw the stained-glass station, various shades of black, crimson, orange and yellow repulsing the surrounding darkness.

Her heart nearly skipped a beat. Instead of Honnouji Academy or Lindblum, the picture wasn't of any place. Or any world. No, resting in the middle of the platform was Senketsu. Both of his eyes were closed. His sleeves were outstretched. And behind his lapels, crossed one over the other, were the Scissor Blades.

"Senketsu..."

The name faded into the darkness, gently echoing against her rapidly beating heart. Her hair rustled, casting flickers of crimson across her grimacing face. And when she landed, sneakers touching down almost at the same time, Ryuko couldn't muster the energy or courage to look away. It had been so long... months... since she'd seen Senketsu outside her memories and dreams. An eternity.

Even if this was nothing more than a memory inside her heart, seeing Senketsu while remembering his last moments plucked a raw nerve that would never heal.

"I know you're out there!"

The sadness building inside her heart devolved into annoyed irritation. Tearing her eyes away from Senketsu's picture, she spat to the side. There was no question *who* dragged her back to this strange place. Not a doubt in her mind, "You have two seconds before I start thinking of ways to pound your smug face into the ground!"

Nothing immediately happened.

Her knuckles cracked.

"ONE..."

"Sheesh, way to take the wind out of my sails."

It took considerable effort not to spin around and deck the bastard. Every nerve was on edge. After two trips to the depths of her heart, how the hell did the guy manage to keep sneaking up on her? She wasn't *that* slow! One day, maybe soon, she'd catch his annoying ass. But for the moment, she suppressed those feelings. She buried them. Locked them deep within her heart. And then almost lost control when the asshole had the freaking audacity to *whine*.

"I had an entire speech ready and everything!"

The man petulantly slouched as he continued strutting away from the Keyblade wielder. But as quickly as his childish depression manifested, he leaned back, propped both hands against his waist and grumbled, **"It would have been awesome! Then you had to come along and be a stick in the mud."**

"Geez, sorry about ruining your fun!"

"Well, since you're apologizing, I suppose I can let this slide..."

"Screw you!"

She didn't have time to waste talking to a figment of her imagination! The guy might be nothing more than her subconscious, or maybe

part of her heart, but that was no excuse for why it was more goddamn annoying than half the assholes back at Honnouji Academy, "But now that you're here, maybe you can clear something up."

Jabbing her finger at the ground, Ryuko viciously narrowed her eyes, "Like Senketsu! Explain why he's here!"

"That is the all-important question, isn't it? Why are we here? What is our purpose in life?"

The two chains dangling from the man's hood jingled as his mood shifted between childish curiosity and seriousness, **"I suppose I could tell... nah. Nope. No can do."**

It was almost as if the guy was purposely screwing with her, "Say what?"

"C'mon, you can't expect me to tell you everything."

Folding his arms against the small of his back, the man leaned forward, head cocked slightly to the right, **"Aren't I nothing more than a figment of your imagination? How could I possibly tell you anything you don't already know?"**

"I don't know..."

In a flash of twinkling crimson, Threadcutter materialized within her clenched fingers. And snapping her arm forward, she aimed the Keyblade straight between the asshole's darkened eyes, "... but I'm willing to give it a try!"

"Look, this place represents your heart. Everything that makes you... well... you."

Despite the menacing prospect of Ryuko's Keyblade, the cloaked man didn't flinch, **"Memories. Recollections. Experiences. The point is, one can only reach the innermost sanctum of their**

heart under extraordinary circumstances. For example, earning a Keyblade. Or equal light and darkness clashing for dominance. Or maybe, just guessing, someone seeking dominance over what's not theirs."

"So, if that's the case..."

With an elbow propped against the palm of his opposite hand and his footsteps echoing softly against the surrounding darkness, an almost teacher-like yet still arrogant tone entered his voice, **"... something must have happened to your heart in the waking world, right?"**

"My heart?"

As her gaze fell downwards, Threadcutter vanished from her fingers. The question felt strange upon her tongue. Almost surreal. Like she wasn't really speaking. The silence pushing on her ears thickened. Her brow knitted together. Something was whispering against her heart. An extremely important memory she'd long since forgotten.

The question felt strange. Almost hollow. Like she wasn't really speaking. Everything felt like a dream. The silence pressing against her heart thickened. Her brow knitted together. An almost forgotten memory lurked on the corners on her mind. It whispered into her ears. But no matter how much she *tried*, it didn't come back. It remained just out of reach, like it was Satsuki's ambitions or her chances of stopping Ardyn from stealing -

"Damn!"

Even if it was nothing more than faded memories, the searing pain of Ardyn tearing out her heart was nightmarish. Without so much as another word, she collapsed onto one knee. Her fingers grasped her chest. Her breathe emerged in quick pants. And snarling, forcing the agonizing torture to the back of her mind, Ryuko forced herself off the ground. Not even Ragyo Kiryuin doing the same thing to her physical heart... or forcibly removing Junketsu with Senketsu and

Mako's help... compared to the intense pain. She remembered everything. Ardyn Izunia. Her heart floating away. Terra screaming her name. Falling down into darkness. Kingdom Hearts.

And something else.

She didn't know what to believe. It could have been nothing more than her imagination. Or a hallucination. Maybe an illusion. Parts of her memory were still a little fuzzy. She couldn't remember what happened to Ardyn. *If* anything happened to the psychotic asshole. But there was something she couldn't forget. A warm and soothing light. A familiar and comforting presence. One that had whispered her name after saving her from a fate worse than death.

"Senketsu..."

Her voice wavered as hope clashed against guilt. The fingers already clenching her jacket tightened. And with barely any inflection, she bit the inside of her cheek, "That light... it was Senketsu, wasn't it?"

"Every heart is unique."

Wind twisted across the stained-glass station as the figure's suddenly serious voice reverberated against the encompassing darkness. With the hems of his coat fluttering, he ignored how quickly her sadness twisted into anger, **"Some are instinctively susceptible to darkness. Others are naturally capable of creating bonds and connections with other hearts. And yet others contain nothing but light. In fact, there are seven such hearts scattered across the worlds. Those hearts rank among the most special. Alongside yours, of course."**

"Great, my subconscious has a sense of humor."

As much as she would rather be kicking the shit out of Xehanort and Ardyn, Ryuko swallowed her impatience. Since the concept of time didn't exist inside her heart, it meant there was time to think of a

foolproof plan to help Terra. Or, since her heart apparently had a terrible sense of humor, listen to her subconscious repeat everything she learned from Beatrix, Steiner and those boring nights in the library.

"Can ya get to the point?"

Now thoroughly annoyed by the figment of her imagination, she shoved one hand into her jacket, "What does any of that have to do with Senketsu?"

"Sheesh, aren't you impatient. Now, where was I? Oh, right. Anyway, look, no two hearts are the same. It's impossible. Everybody knows that."

Holding out one hand, and then the other, the cloaked man squeezed them together, **"But this Senketsu's heart was... or, rather, is... pretty much identical to yours. Unless someone looks for the small differences, it's impossible to tell you and him apart."**

Her breath hitched in the pit of her stomach when light began shining from within her chest. A constellation of crimson, ruby, white and gold danced across her face. A familiar warmth spread throughout her body. Somewhere in the back of her heart, it felt like she was wearing Senketsu. It didn't make sense. It couldn't make sense. But it was almost as if Senketsu was protecting her heart.

"Senketsu? But he's..."

"Dead? Deceased? Departed for the great beyond? Rejoined the Lifestream?"

Each synonym was punctuated by a new pose. Every question was hammier and more over-the-top than the last. But when she cracked her knuckles, flickers of crimson light coalescing around her fingers, he lazily shrugged, **"It's complicated. And it's simple. In the end, all *you* need to do is remember one of Beatrix's most valuable**

lessons. Just because we lose those close to us, that doesn't necessarily mean they're gone forever."

The soft pitter patter of the man's boots drew her attention. For a moment, she hadn't *heard* him move. And then, out of nowhere, he was standing within arm's reach, one finger pointed at the crimson light radiating from her chest, **"As long as you never forget Senketsu, he'll always exist inside your heart. Comprendre?"**

"So, he's alive?"

"Hmm... don't know."

"But you just said..."

"Yes... no... maybe," the annoying asshole leaned backwards, one hand resting against his unseen chin, before spontaneously blurting, **"Well, *someone* had to protect your heart from that guy, right?"**

"Well, yeah, but -"

"And since you were unconscious, it couldn't have been you," the chains dangling from the stranger's hood jingled as he nonchalantly pivoted on the spot, shoulders shrugging and voice increasingly dismissive, **"Besides, Terra was way too busy dealing with that other guy to help. No way could he have made it in time to save your heart. Nuh uh. Couldn't have happened. Unless... gasp! Maybe your heart saved itself!?"**

Her eyebrow twitched at the bastard's flamboyant gasp. As in, he literally said the word 'gasp.' All with a freaking straight face! No, scratch that! Maybe she couldn't see his face because of the stupid-as-hell coat, but she could *sense* the asshole's mockery. It seriously pissed her off! Even if he was nothing more than her subconscious, she was going to take his shit laying down.

"I've got another question."

Alongside a soothing outpouring of crimson light and stars, Threadcutter materialized in her fingers. But instead of threatening the annoying figment of her imagination, something that probably wouldn't have worked but would have felt really good, she raised the gold and bright ruby Keyblade. She held the weapon in front of her face, light reflecting off the polished surface and keychain jingling, "If Senketsu's heart really is inside me, is that why Threadcutter looks like him?"

"That's definitely a possibility... or maybe it's just a coincidence."

The stranger pivoted on his right foot, one hand stroking his chin. Bobbing his head back and forth, an almost thoughtful gesture except for his childish behavior, he marched across the glass before stopping at the top of Senketsu's skirt, **"Well, to be honest, your heart is peculiar. So, pretty much anything's possible. But if you're asking whether or not Senketsu's heart has magically transformed itself into your Keyblade... or he somehow *became* your Keyblade... then forget it. Nope. Not possible. The Keyblade doesn't work like that."**

"Are you sure?"

"Of course," an enigmatic chuckle grated against her ears, **"Keyblades are kind of my specialty."**

"Oh..."

"Anyway, Senketsu is the least of your worries."

Ryuko's mouth twitched when the man's voice suddenly changed directions. In the blink of an eye, while she'd been paying attention to what he was saying, the bastard teleported across the platform, **"Things that were meant to be are no longer guaranteed to pass."**

"If you're gonna spew more cryptic bullshit, get it over with already!"

And there it was. The start of what she'd been expecting since opening her eyes. The asshole was close enough that, if she believed it would work, she would have already elbowed both his kidneys before pile-driving him through the floor. The look on his face would have been priceless. But instead of wasting time and energy, Threadcutter spun around her fingers as she angrily pointed the Keyblade over her shoulder without turning around.

"Unless you want this Keyblade shoved up your freaking ass!"

"That's what I like about you, Ryuko."

The man enthusiastically pushed the Keyblade away from his face before walking away, arms folded against the small of his back, **"I mean, the others think they have what it takes to change the future. They believe collecting Lux... and forming unions... and a whole heaping scoop of enthusiasm is enough to alter what's set in stone. But you? Sure, there were times you were faced with impossible odds. Life-threatening battles even Ira would find troubling. Yet you *pushed* yourself forward without regret. You were determined to save your friends and sister. You didn't think you could, you *knew* you could. And that makes all the difference."**

"Ira?"

It felt like she'd been dreaming and just finally opened her eyes, "Hold on! You've met Gamagori?"

"Nope. Different person. But I'm certain your Ira and my Ira would get along quite well."

"What's that supposed to -"

"Now, your journey's not going to be easy."

Abruptly stopping in the middle of the platform with a bombastic huff while ignoring her question, the hooded stranger propped one hand

against the waist while raising the other over his head, **"The door remains closed, but someone *will* eventually find the key. And when they do, *you* need to be prepared for what comes next. But don't fret. Don't lose your way. Let your heart be your guiding key. Trust in your friends and sister. Seek out those whose fates you've irreversibly altered. And most important of all, don't be afraid."**

"Wait!"

Her sneakers squeaked as she launched herself towards the bastard.

"For if you wish to ensure light doesn't grow extinguished, you must accept the abyss of darkness lurking inside your heart."

She wasn't going to let the guy fade away into the darkness! Not again! Not without getting some actual answers!

"I'm not through with you!"

With a snap of her wrist, sneakers skidding along the stained glass, she reared her arm backwards and chucked Threadcutter at the asshole. But it was too late. Right before her Keyblade sliced through his stomach, the bastard dissipated into pitch-black smoke and purple darkness. His cowardly retreat left her hanging. It left her forced to watch Threadcutter vanish over the edge of the station. Her eyebrow twitched. Suddenly empty fingers convulsed before clenching into a fist. She took a deep, ragged breath. She closed her eyes.

And when the anger passed, she snapped her fingers open, Threadcutter reappearing alongside twinkling stars of crimson.

"What the hell was he talking about?"

Not a single word the asshole said made sense. An abyss of darkness? Tch! As if! Like that was going to happen. And that talk

about a door was probably her heart referring to Kingdom Hearts. Which made it *her* business. Snorting as she propped Threadcutter against her shoulder, she threw her head back, "The freak was probably speaking out of his ass! Now, where the hell's the damn..."

While she wasn't looking, the picture of Senketsu had changed into something else.

"No way..."

Threadcutter nearly fell from her fingers. A strange numbness spread through her arms and legs. A chill raced down her spine as the darkness grew closer. But the only think she noticed was the various purples, pinks, whites and shades of yellow replacing Senketsu. No way would she not recognize the blonde psychopath curled along the side of the platform. The Grand Couturier looked just like she remembered. Right down to the ugly-as-hell pink dress and matching boots and fingerless gloves. One of the bitch's arms reached across the platform and the other was down near her knees, familiar crimson threads twisting around and through her fingers.

But instead of massive pigtails, waves of curled blonde cascaded down Nui Harime's back.

And the tacky eyepatch covering her left eye was missing.

"You've got to be kidding me!"

She was caught completely off guard when gravity inverted itself, all for shits and giggles. One moment she was staring at Nui Harime, wondering if shattering the stained glass would have serious repercussions on her heart, and the next she was falling backwards.

"What the -"

Something was pulling her towards the edge of the platform. Her shoes squeaked against the floor as she struggled, pushing herself in the opposite direction using every ounce of power in her muscles.

She managed to take one step. And then another, teeth clenched and sweat beading down her cheeks. Only to be blindsided by a thick miasma of darkness exploding out of goddamn nowhere. It knocked her off her feet. It surrounded her. It pressed against her heart, making it impossible to breathe.

Unable to scream, let alone curse, she fell backwards, tumbling off the platform into the infinite darkness.

Chapter 10.2

An idea came to me when I started writing this section. A new way, so to speak, of writing. In a manner of speaking, this chapter could be viewed as the epilogue of the Birth By Sleep Arc. In other words, the credits, more or less. Of course, things aren't close to being wrapped up. But it started an interesting train of thought - instead of simply writing one section from Ryuko's PoV, as I've always done with a few exceptions, why not introduce cutaway scenes at key points in the dialogue? For example, describe what another character is doing without breaking the overall flow. For this section, that is what I've separated it into several parts. Each starts with Ryuko (as below) or immediately cuts back to where I previously left off. And each ends with a cutaway to another character.

Tell me what you think of it.

[img:

https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/finalfantasy/images/7/73/DFE2015_Alexandria_Webphoto_3.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/980?cb=20170216122617]

"Ugh..."

The changing weather sucked. And the cold really sucked. Grumbling out half-formed curses and accompanying mumbles, Ryuko flipped over, pulling the thick blanket over the top of her face. She didn't care what time it was. If Beatrix wanted her to sprint laps around the castle, the woman could kiss her goddamn ass! Nobody in their right minds willingly got up at the crack of dawn to run marathons. Not even Mako had that kind of energy. Nobody did. Not now. Not ever.

"Screw her..."

Shuffling further underneath the increasingly comfortable blanket, she sighed, face smooshed against the pillow and a thin line of drool leaking from the corner of her mouth. Thoughts of going back to sleep until Rusty barged through the door and *forcibly* dragged her out of bed filled her heart.

And in the next moment, said blanket launched itself across the room, courtesy of her foot.

"What the hell!?"

A flash of crimson light accompanied the instinctive appearance of Threadcutter as she vaulted onto her feet, bouncing slightly against the mattress. Fire magic danced around her other hand. Tendrils of flames harmlessly licked her fingers while curling halfway down her forearm. For several long seconds, she stood on the bed, Keyblade swinging back and forth. Silk pajamas bearing cartoonish chocobos and moogles hugged her body as she blinked, then glowered, right before confusion hammered its way into her heart.

"Huh?"

This was her room in Alexandria Castle. She was back in her room. Slowly lowering her arm one inch at a time, Threadcutter bounced against her leg before disintegrating into shards of crimson light as she grumbled. The magic around her fingers vanished as she lazily ran them through her disheveled hair. It was midmorning, maybe almost noon. But the thunderous clouds made telling time really difficult. A cold breeze whispered through the open window across the room, rustling the thin drapes. In the corner behind her dresser and the full-length mirror, a large pile of Gil, approximately most of Regent Cid's reward for saving Lindblum, sat unguarded.

And leaning against the desk next to the window, scabbard hanging off the handle and looking as polished as the night everything first went to shit, was the Scissor Blade.

Everything looked exactly as she remembered.

The only significant difference was the lack of clothes scattered across the floor. But that probably meant Rusty ordered the castle staff to tidy her room while she was sleeping.

Again.

"Tch! Just a crazy dream..."

An obnoxious moan escaped through the open window as she collapsed onto the bed, arms and legs flying upwards. The mattress bounced a second time, bedsprings groaning underneath the strain. Great. Awesome. Not only was her blanket across the room, but she was hungry. Really hungry. Like she hadn't eaten in days. With disheveled hair tickling her nose, Ryuko closed her eyes and tried going back to sleep. She tried clearing her mind. But something kept whispering against her heart. It wouldn't leave her alone. And so, when she finally decided to stop trying, one after the other, almost as if responding to her confusion, memories returned.

The Keyblade Graveyard. Kingdom Hearts. Working with Terra to kick Xehanort's ass. Sucker punching Vanitas off the cliff.

And Ardyn stabbing her in the back.

Maybe it hadn't been a dream.

"But how the hell did I get back here?"

The last thing she could remember was her ankles and wrists painfully chaffing when the freak pinned her to the ground. Then nothing. Scrunching her nose at the sudden amnesia, she closed her eyes, gave it another try before finally, with a tired sigh, grumbled. Alright, so she couldn't remember what happened. But why? It didn't make any sense. Either she somehow beat the bastard's face into a bloody pulp, helped Terra finish off Xehanort and made her way back to Alexandria, all without a single memory, or someone else finished the job.

"... ugh..."

Sitting up on the bed, she immediately slouched forward with a yawn, disheveled hair falling over her baggy eyes. Alright, this officially sucked. Every time she tried latching onto the faintest shadows of what happened, the memories dissolved into nothingness. But if her heart felt like being obnoxious, that meant it was time to seek another opinion. Whoever brought her back to Alexandria after kicking Ardyn's psychotic ass probably had all the answers.

And she was going to get them, one way or another.

"I'm starving..."

But getting answers could wait until after breakfast. Because right now, she felt hungry enough to clear out the kitchen.

"... hope Quina's still workin'..."

Goosebumps rippled up her legs as her bare feet met the cold marble floor. Another yawn forced her mouth wide open. Strands of loose and disheveled hair bounced as exhausted eyes slowly opened and closed.

"... because I don't feel like arguing so goddamn early..."

After doing a rush-job on her hair, which, if she was being perfectly honest, required a hot shower and about an hour of tough love, Ryuko shuffled towards the door, one hand covering her yawning mouth.

"... no change. But I refuse to consider the alternative."

Her hand stopped inches from the door.

That was Satsuki's voice.

"Gosh, I didn't mean it like that, Satsuki."

And that was Mickey.

"As long as you, me and everyone else believes in her, Ryuko's heart will have many lights to push away the darkness. She'll wake up in no time. And when she does, we'll be right here waiting for her. She won't be alone. Not this time."

"Of course."

Satsuki *sounded* convinced, maybe even assured, by Mickey's apology, "I left her alone once. I wasn't there when Ryuko needed me the most. Never again. Even if I must lay down my life, I shall not leave her side."

She'd heard enough.

"Hey!"

No, as a matter of fact, it was the opposite. From the way they were talking, Mickey and Satsuki knew something important. And being kept out of the loop, even if she wasn't conscious or whatever at the time, was annoying. She had questions. They had answers. It was that simple. And so, pulling open the door hard enough that it nearly slammed against the opposite if not for her fingers, she glanced back and forth, "Anyone mind explainin' why I'm in my pajamas?"

"Ryuko!?"

"Ryuko!?"

It happened way to fast to counter. Her heart was still catching up to the *strangeness*. But as she heard her name repeated in stereo, a pair of arms wrapped around her shoulders. Strands of black hair forced their way into her mouth as a mixture of strawberry and other fragrances filled her head. Yet there was no pressure in the hug. Nothing but relief and warmth. Maybe a little worry. She was seriously confused. Why the hell was Satsuki acting so goddamn strange out of the blue? Sure, she got her ass kicked by that

bastard. But it wasn't any different from the other times she bit off more than she could chew.

"Alright..."

The corners of her mouth twitching, Ryuko accepted the unfamiliar gesture with supernatural restraint, "... who are you and what have you done with the real Satsuki?"

"Humph."

Clack.

"A ridiculous question."

When her sister's tone shifted several octaves, not to mention the unmistakable *tap* of heels against marble, Ryuko nearly rolled her eyes. Great. This was perfect. Mickey was innocent of what was about to happen, but she recognized the *clack*. She knew that haughty and I'm-better-than-you tone. It had been a while, but something that annoying never quite faded into the background.

"For it is I, not you, who harbor concern. Did you intend on sleeping forever? Did you believe the world ground to a halt merely because you weren't around to witness its actions?"

Scoffing arrogantly as irritation formed within her sister's eyes, Satsuki curled a finger through her hair, absentmindedly tucking several strands behind her ear, "How do you intend on apologizing for your petulant and childish behavior?"

"Apologize!?"

In the background, Mickey resembled the textbook definition of confusion. But that was a perfectly natural reaction. Most people didn't have the luxury of witnessing this aspect of her sis's heart. Not after they took down Ragyo Kiryuin. But Satsuki could move from 'sisterly respect' to caterpillar-eyebrowed bitch' faster than a moogles

after spotting a Kupo Nut on the shelf. It looked bad. Hell, it sounded bad. Yet she couldn't help but grin, "As if! I ain't apologizing for something that wasn't my fault!"

Punching one hand against the opposing palm, she ground her knuckles until they cracked, "Unless you want to throw down! Right here, right now!"

"You had us worried."

For the third time since their mother's self-inflicted death, Satsuki basked in the warmth radiating from her heart. A strange, comforting light. One that caused her lips to quirk upwards into the slightest of smiles, "But it appears your heart is perfectly fine."

"Huh?"

Now *that* comment she hadn't expected, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Gosh, you gave us all quite the scare, Ryuko."

Mickey tried not gawking. But boy, was that difficult! Because more than anything, he was befuddled. Not to mention confused! This was the first time he'd actually seen Ryuko speak with Satsuki. Was this how they usually greeted each other? Maybe it was their world's standard custom. He would ask, but... well... that might be considered rude. Besides, maybe he was overthinking things. Ryuko didn't look *that* bothered by Satsuki's stream of rude insults. And if he tilted his head just right, Satsuki was almost smiling. Maybe they were simply expressing themselves in a way that made sense. Not to him or anyone else.

But to *them*.

"You know, for a while, we all thought you planned on sleeping forever."

Chuckling bashfully, he couldn't help but smile. After losing Ven, Terra, Aqua and countless others to darkness... all because of Xehanort's cruel ambitions... knowing Ryuko was alright lessened the guilt burdening his heart, "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good, I guess."

Her room was on the top floor of one the castle's central towers. Meaning, unless someone ascending several flights of spiraling steps, snuck around dozens of trained guards and kicked the ass of the best Keyblade Master around, not to mention Steiner, she usually had the run of the place. Which was perfectly fine since Satsuki was staying in the room underneath her own. But still, someone was missing. It was great seeing Mickey and Satsuki after waking up. But Ryuko couldn't help but feel like a certain annoyance was conspicuously absent.

"Hey, where's Steiner?"

Leaning around her sister, she took in the empty hallway and the distinctive lack of *clacking*, "He busy or something?"

"Captain Steiner's been awfully worried about you, Ryuko."

No matter how much he tried, Mickey found it impossible to completely behave as if nothing was wrong. Sure, he was happy Ryuko was alright. And after the horrible events preceding the X-Blade going haywire, any good news made the darkness not feel as thick. Especially since... no! He couldn't think like that! He had faith in Aqua. Her heart was strong. No matter how bad things seemed... even if he could no longer sense her light... he needed to believe she was alright. That one day, sooner or later, Aqua would return. Ven would wake up.

And together, they would find Terra.

"If Satsuki hadn't changed his mind, he would have stood guard outside your room, day and night, until you woke up!"

Ryuko scratched her neck, "Really?"

"Words alone wouldn't have sufficed."

Satsuki exhaled softly, the faintest huff of air passing through her lips, "Steiner was adamant about fulfilling his duties as captain of the Knights of Pluto. And his soldiers were prepared to follow suit. But such determination was born from guilt. And as such, it was easily corrected. Once I explained only Xehanort bore fault, and that I did not blame him in the slightest for what happened, he was more than willing to allow me to stand guard."

"Oh, right..."

Hearing that awful name brought back terrible memories. But instead of thinking about Xehanort, Mickey's eyes spontaneously widened. Gosh! How could he have forgotten someone that important? If not for *him*, none of this would have been possible, "Boy, I can't believe it slipped my mind, Ryuko, but the guy you should really thank is Gilgamesh!"

"Gilgamesh?"

Ryuko blinked. Slowly, "... *he* saved me? Not you?"

"Well, it's... uh... it's complicated. I think, Or, um, maybe not," Mickey rubbed a hand against his chin, "Gilgamesh found you floating in the Lanes Between. Gosh, you were in pretty rough shape. If he hadn't been there, who knows what might have happened!"

"... huh..."

She all but drawled the syllable, allowing the sound to linger on her tongue. As much as she believed Mickey, nothing he said made any goddamn sense! Why the hell would Gilgamesh take time out of his day to save her? It wasn't like they were friends. Or enemies. Or, no matter what the asshole believed, rivals. She hardly knew the guy. In

fact, she hadn't seen him since Lindblum, when he'd looked at the Scissor Blade with a suspicious glint in his eyes.

"I'm not sayin' you're wrong, but Gilgamesh ain't the kind of guy to do anything out of the kindness of his heart."

An eyebrow twitched as memories of the multi-armed freak's disturbing interest in the Scissor Blade shoved their way to the forefront of her heart, "He had to have taken *something*."

At approximately the same time in Burmecia

With a constant pitter-patter familiar only to those born under Burmecia's light, rain splashed against countless puddles as Freya Crescent glared at the prone figure laying face-down in the middle of the courtyard. Her clawed feet gripped slickened cobblestone while water streaked down the intricately woven vermilion coat. Her tail swished back and forth. The royal coat-of-arms emblazoned upon her escutcheon glistened from the downpour. Jade eyes, bearing growing coldness, narrowed underneath bangs of alabaster as she stepped forward, the faint sound of her footsteps echoing against thunder.

"Do you take me for a fool?"

The 'unconscious' figure's upper left hand briefly twitched.

"Humph, so be it."

Her fingers tightened around the three-pronged javelin as, one by one, landing softly enough for naught but her well-trained ears to sense, dragon knights encircled the thief. They landed upon the central fountain depicted ancient kings of ages past. Some flashed into existence on currents of wind and rain, standing at key points on

the street. A handful appeared in bursts of lightning on the surrounding buildings, coats and spears illuminated by eternal thunderstorms.

And one standing at her side, his arrival heralded by the faintest whisper against the roaring wind.

"By the way, Master Beatrix informed us of your little... trick."

In response to the brutal truth, another one of the swordsman's arms twitched. But Freya no longer cared about his opinion, "There's nowhere for you to run. It's over, Gilgamesh."

Accentuated by the clapping of thunder, water snaked along the contours of her winged hat. Clawed fingers shifted against her multi-pronged javelin, thumb resting upon the sharpened head. But instead of attacking or ordering her brothers and sisters to bring an end to the thief's life before he miraculously escaped, as most likely Gilgamesh expected given his previous mannerisms, Freya turned aside, concealed jade eyes meeting warm sapphire. They met for a brief instant. And after turning once more to the prone criminal, she nodded, but not without slamming her spear against the ground.

"Stand upon your feet, Gilgamesh."

Pulling down the brim of his hat, Sir Fratley, alone and with guard seemingly lowered, approached the multi-armed swordsman feigning substantial injury, "I won't allow your cowardice to sully our honor."

"..."

A bubble formed in the puddle surrounding Gilgamesh's face.

"..."

Another bubble, then a dozen more, popped as the weapon connoisseur's arms, all six of them, convulsed.

"GAH!!!"

All but vomiting the buckets of dirty water sucked into the lungs, thanks in no part to his masterful acting skills, Gilgamesh propped one set of arms against the ground, shook his head and leapt onto his feet. Darn it! This wasn't fair! Why wasn't anything going as planned? Not only had his original escape plan been thrown out the window, but the rude dragon knights almost scratched his Genji Armor! If not for his brilliant improvising and spur-of-the-moment lateral thinking, he would have needed to visit Daguerreo. And those uppity and arrogant moogles always overcharged for their services!

Which had nothing to do with him *accidentally* crashing through their shop that one time!

It hadn't even been his fault!

"Humph! If this is some sort of reverse psychology, that won't work on me!"

What was the point of something like honor if it meant you couldn't accomplish whatever you wanted? Sure, having standards in life was important. And yeah, of course he wasn't evil or insane. Not like that other guy. But stuff like chivalry? Bah! That was for men and women... and women who dress liked men. And Keyblade Masters who had the annoying habit of popping out of the woodwork. He cared not for light or darkness. Or even the nothingness between. Wait, was nothingness even a thing? Nope. Nothing was nothing. If it existed in the first place, then there couldn't be nothing! The only thing he cared about - his life's purpose, if one were so bold - was collecting weapons. All kinds of weapons. Not just swords of all shapes and sizes, but every legendary and ancient weapon across the Realm of Light.

The double-pronged javelin forged of wyrmscale, adamantite and orichalcum resting upon his shoulder glistened in the pouring rain.

Dragon Whisker.

At long last, after scouring the furthest worlds east and west of Lindblum, the legendary spear was finally his!

"A weapon such as this shouldn't hang above a throne like some Adamantoise carcass! It should be used! It should be wielded! And on alternating Thursdays and Mondays, polished!"

Lightning scorched the heavens as he hefted Dragon Whisker overhead.

"You had a chance to make amends after Lindblum, but it appears your heart has been tainted by darkness."

Disappointment was evident within Fratley's voice as the bardiche-like lance sheathed upon his back spontaneously appeared in his fingers. All within the split-second gap between two successive flashes of lightning, "However, as a courtesy, I shall grant you one chance. Hand over Dragon Whisker. Turn around. Never return to Burmecia. If you refuse, then my spear shall forever purge the worlds of your darkness, once and for all."

["Oh boy... err..."](#)

He shivered. But it wasn't from the rain. Or even the freezing water soaking his undergarments. This sense of impending doom came from the Burmecian. Which was impossible. How could someone so gosh darn polite radiate such an intense and overwhelming aura? It was almost intimidating. Keyword being 'almost.' Because compared to Satsuki, whose authoritative presence somehow manifested into an eye-searing aura of blazing light that burned with an intensity greater than a thousand suns, this guy was a rank amateur.

Now, if only his knees would stop trembling...

Last edited: Dec 27, 2018

Unknown Report 10

I would like to thank everybody for the criticism. I'm not perfect. Sometimes I screw up. Or something sounds perfect until somebody else reads it. I can't find every mistake. And upon re-reading the last few updates, I realized something was missing. A, shall we say, interlude or intermission. Something to fill in the blanks between Ryuko falling off her Station of Awakening and finally awakening in her bed back in Alexandria Castle. In retrospect, and it's ironic, this wouldn't have worked without first writing the last update. The only question was properly labeling this. I think calling this Unknown Report 10 should work. I know there isn't an Unknown Report 9, but things worked out that way. Anyway, I hope you enjoy it.

To clear any further confusion, this takes place between 10.1 and 10.2.

Unknown Report 10

Where am I?

Did you have lots of fun getting your butt kicked?

Huh?

What the hell are you talking about?

Wait, have you really forgotten?

Forgot what?

Think carefully.

Everything's still there.

I was with Terra.

We were fighting Xehanort and... and...

... and Ardyn.

You remember.

Your Heart remembers.

After all, you're Ryuko Matoi.

The darkness can never take that from you.

Wait. Hold on. But how...

That guy thought he could take your Heart.

But you sure showed him!

Showed him what?

That man.

Are you feeling alright?

Yeah, I think so.

Still feel like a pincushion.

Nothing new, I guess.

Are you SURE you're alright?

It's not embarrassing to admit the truth.

I fought worse.

Have you?

Have you REALLY?

What did I just say?

That bastard was strong.

No question.

But Ragyo Kiryuin was a bitch.

A bitch, huh?

That's an interesting choice of words!

Shut up.

You were careless.

Yeah.

Yeah, I was.

How do you intend on changing that?

Getting stronger.

That's about the only thing I can do.

Sounds kind of boring.

It's the only way I can protect everybody.

Terra, Aqua, Ven, Mickey...

... and Satsuki.

Light.

Darkness.

One or the other.

It's all up to you.

In order to protect them...

... you need to make a choice.

What kind of choice is that?

Because you can't last much longer.

Sooner or later.

Your Heart is going to shatter.

And when it does...

Everything will be undone.

And it'll all be your fault.

What's that supposed to mean!?

It's time to wake up, Ryuko.

No!

Explain what you just said!

A growing girl can only sleep for so long.

Eventually, she has to wake up.

Wait!

Don't give in, Ryuko.

Stay strong.

Don't lose control.

Not even for a minute.
Or you'll lose everything.

Hold on!

I'm not finished!

After all, everything begins with...

... Birth By Sleep.

Last edited: Dec 27, 2018

Chapter 10.3

Although I knew this would happen, it's always frustrating splitting one section into multiple parts. Not because it's difficult to write. No. But because doing so inevitably means rewriting the last 200-300 words of the first section after I realizing something did not work. I suppose it's standard with writing. You finish somewhere you think is great. But once you come back and take another look at what you've written, you find it's not that good. Anyway, this is an extremely somber moment in the story. But it's quite necessary. The ending of Birth By Sleep wasn't exactly pleasant. Ven's heart was missing. Terra was 'dead.' And Aqua disappeared off the face of existence.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy it.

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/6/60/KILLAKILL17_19.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20150407022256]

"Where's Rusty?"

It was a stupid question. And she felt stupider for not realizing Steiner's absence from the beginning, "He busy or something?"

"Not at all! Captain Steiner's been awfully worried about you, Ryuko!"

No matter how hard he tried keeping a stiff upper lip, Mickey found it impossible to completely behave as though nothing was wrong. Sure, he was happy Ryuko was awake. After he'd watched the X-Blade go haywire, any good news cleared away the darkness. Especially since... no! He couldn't think like that! There was no reason to doubt Aqua. Her heart was strong and full of hope and light and everything that made her an excellent and trustworthy friend and Keyblade Master. No matter how bad things might look... even if he could no longer feel her light... he wouldn't allow his heart to go down that awful road. He needed to believe she was alright.

And that one day, sooner or later, she'd return from the darkness.

"As a matter of fact, when you were brought back to Alexandria, he checked each nook and cranny with constant vigilance and determination!"

Motioning towards Satsuki with both hands, he nodded twice, "Ya know, if Satsuki hadn't changed his mind, Captain Steiner would have stood outside your room, day and night, until you woke up!"

"Really?"

As much as she wanted to believe Mickey, that sounded nothing like Steiner. The guy was stubborn as a freaking rock. Sure, her sis was good at bossing people, but nothing short of an order from Garnet or Beatrix, on a good day, could change his mind, "I seriously doubt that."

"Words alone wouldn't have sufficed."

Grasping the single loose strand of hair between her thumb and forefinger, Satsuki curled it behind her ear. The faintest huff of air escaped her slightly-parted lips. And with a resigned yet otherwise unremarkable sigh, continued, "To ensure your protection, he was willing to cast aside his duties as captain of the Knights of Pluto. Such determination couldn't be swayed by logic. However, his decision was formed not from chivalry and honor, but guilt. He blamed himself for your condition. And thus, once I explained only Xehanort bore fault, Steiner begrudgingly acquiesced."

"Geez, I can't believe Rusty was beatin' himself up over me..."

As her cheeks puffed outwards, Ryuko slowly blinked. Then rubbed a hand against her neck. Now that she thought about it, she *could* believe Steiner would blame himself. He was just that kind of guy. Nice, but annoying and unable to take a joke. Like a more serious version of Gamagori. Which meant once he found out she was

awake, he was going to probably start yelling the usual nonsense, "... well, since he saved me, I guess I gotta thank him."

"There's someone else you should thank."

Hearing that awful name brought back terrible memories. But instead of thinking too hard about Xehanort, Mickey almost smacked himself in the face. Gosh, how did he forget someone so important? Sure, the guy was something of a renowned criminal. They weren't friends. Not by a long shot. More like acquaintances. Maybe he was a little cowardly. And greedy. But when push came to shove and things began looking grim, *he* was willing to risk his neck, even if it happened to be for the wrong reasons, "And that's Gilgamesh! After all, he's the guy who saved you!"

"Gilgamesh?"

Ryuko felt her mood pull a complete one-eighty, "... *he* saved me?"

"After you... um, well... lost consciousness, Gilgamesh found you floating in the Lanes Between," Mickey rubbed his chin as he remembered, quite vividly, the self-professed swordsman appearing out of nowhere, "Ryuko, you were in pretty bad shape. If he hadn't shown up, I don't know what might have happened to you."

"... huh..."

Drawling out the syllable, allowing it to linger on her tongue, Ryuko blinked slowly as she tried - and failed - to process everything. Why the hell would Gilgamesh save her? It wasn't like they were friends. Or enemies. Or hell, no matter what he believed, rivals. She hardly knew the freak. In fact, she hadn't seen him since Lindblum, when he'd been ogling the Scissor Blade with a suspicious glint in his eyes.

"I'm not sayin' that's not what happened..."

An eyebrow twitched at memories of the bastard's interest in the Scissor Blade, "But Gilgamesh ain't the kind of guy to do something for nothing. He must have taken *something*."

She half-expected Gilgamesh to try sneaking through the window. But after looking over her shoulder at the Scissor Blade still leaning against her desk, Ryuko accepted reality. Whether it made sense or not, the asshole didn't take the Scissor Blade. And she still had Threadcutter, although she wouldn't put it past Gilgamesh to try stealing her Keyblade. Which left only a single question burning in her heart.

"Ugh, how did he know I was in trouble?"

The twitch of Satsuki's right eyebrow, thick as it was, gave away the game, "When did *you* run into Gilgamesh?"

"Within a few minutes of our initial separation."

Satsuki allowed her thoughts to reminisce upon that particular evening. At the moment of the Star Shard's initial activation, she'd known something was wrong. But it had been too late to change anything. Ryuko had disappeared into the Realm of Light. And she had found herself standing outside a delapidated castle floating amongst the heavens. Chains forged out of wrought mithril, rusted by years of weather and abandonment, had connected the magically-levitating ground to the continent miles underneath her boots.

Yet as she quickly prepared to search for the familiar warmth of Ryuko's light amongst the bitter coldness of the cosmos, Gilgamesh made his presence known, leaping from one of the castle's tallest towers.

Magical barriers and ancient wards shattering in the wake of his cacophonous arrival.

"Perhaps the Star Shard brought me to him. Or maybe our meeting was nothing more than coincidence."

"Hey, you weren't here before, were you?"

A finger twitched before, with surgical precision, she pushed the annoyance to the deepest recesses of her mind, "Who can say?"

"Wait a sec... those eyes, that perpetual scowl..."

Ryuko folded her arms across her chest.

"And?"

Satsuki's gaze hardened.

"He immediately sought the Scissor Blade."

"Oh? Is that... a Scissor Blade?"

With a nod, however slight, she directed her sister's attention towards the other half of the Scissor Blades strapped to her back, "I, of course, explained to Gilgamesh what would happen if he so much as laid a finger upon it."

"C'mon! Let me at least touch it!"

Steel-blue eyes imperceptibly narrowed at the petulance reverberating within the confines of her memories. That someone with such inherent power, forged through determination and perseverance against insurmountable odds, behaved in such an egregious fashion was insulting. Yet not nearly to the same extent as Gilgamesh believing, even for a moment, she was willing to wager the Scissor Blade against one of his own blades over a foolish card game.

"And when that failed achieving his objective, he attempted to gamble for it."

"Here! You can have five cards! Err... oh right, the rules..."

A sigh carrying the extent of her tension dissipated into nothingness inches from her lips, "You could have described his disposition with a little more detail, Ryuko."

"Uh... what's that light? Hang on... wait!"

"It ain't like me and the guy are friends!"

Why the hell was Satsuki blaming *her* for Gilgamesh acting like a total freak? It wasn't her fault the guy was *that* into weapons! Not like it mattered. Six arms. Twelve arms. Hell, give him one hundred arms! If the asshole tried anything funny, Satsuki could beat his freaking ass halfway into next week, "Hey, you never explained *why* he got involved."

"You called to me."

Satsuki's brow furrowed as the events of that evening replayed inside her mind. She remembered every intimate detail. Her sister's comatose form. Steiner's forlorn and guilty expression as he carried Ryuko into the castle. Mickey blaming himself. Everything, "As I was prepared to begin my search, through the infinite darkness between worlds, your light shone akin to a beacon. Strong enough that Gilgamesh was capable of pinpointing its origin."

"My light?"

A memory hovered beyond the tip of her fingers. It was so close she could almost touch it. She'd been falling. Someone had screamed her name. Terra, maybe? She couldn't remember anything. And the more she tried, the more she focused her thoughts and heart, the further everything transformed into awkward colors and incomprehensible sounds, "Ugh! That doesn't help when I can't remember anything!"

Mickey's eyes widened, "You don't... remember anything?"

"No..."

Well, that wasn't completely true. She remembered everything up to a certain point. Fighting Xehanort with Terra. Kicking the old man's ass. Ardyn arriving out of nowhere to stab her in the back. There was a lot she wanted to forget. But all the important stuff was missing. Almost like someone reached into her heart, found the memories and cut them out, "I remember fighting Ardyn. And losing. I mean... crud... the guy was freaking powerful. Almost as strong as Rag..."

The name faltered on the tip of her tongue before quickly changing into something else.

"Anyway!"

Shouting made her sound suspicious. But despite staring at a random spot on the wall, Ryuko could *feel* Satsuki's eyes drilling holes in the back of her neck. Something she ignored by strumming her fingers against the inside of her arm, "Last thing I remember is the psychopath choke-slammng me to the ground. Then nothing. Ya mind filling in the details?"

"It's a long story, Ryuko."

With a resolute grimace, Mickey steeled his heart. There were many ways he could have told Ryuko what happened. But no matter how awful it might make him feel, he had to tell her the good and honest truth. They were friends. She trusted him. And golly, he trusted her, "I suppose it started when you... um... punched Vanitas. After helping Ven onto his feet, Aqua and me, well, we were ready to help you and Terra stop Xehanort once and for all! But at the last second, the person you fought alongside Sir Auron appeared out of nowhere."

"Hold on."

A glower forced its way onto Ryuko's face, "How do you know about him?"

"Don't be foolish, Ryuko."

Satsuki scoffed out the corner of her mouth, an otherwise restrained reaction to the ridiculous question, "While you were sleeping, I informed Mickey of your confrontation. Every detail and ability. Not including your various exaggerations."

"Oh... right..."

Great. Perfect. Now she felt like an idiot, "Sorry about that, Mickey."

"It's alright, Ryuko!"

There was something Mickey still couldn't understand. It was important. He knew it. But even talking with Yen Sid didn't get them any closer to the truth. The villain's temporal abilities hadn't been shocking. Just annoying. Or maybe frustrating when the guy started improvising. Yet that wasn't the problem. One moment, the stranger was holding their own against Aqua and himself. And the next, immediately after Ryuko's light faded into the night sky and something horrible happened to Ven, the guy suddenly disappeared. Not in the same way Satsuki claimed Ryuko saw.

This had been different.

"Anyway, that guy was pretty tough. I don't think me or Aqua could have taken him. Not by ourselves. And with Ven confronting Vanitas, we were kinda worried. But then one of your attacks sliced through the ground. It took everyone off guard. And the explosion of light following in its wake injured the cloaked villain."

Ryuko smirked despite Satsuki's souring expression. Maybe she should have been a little more careful. But in her defense, Xehanort was an asshole, "So, I got two psychopaths for the price of one Sen'i Soshitsu, huh?"

"Your... Sen'i Soshitsu... helped Aqua out of a really tough spot," Mickey repeated the strange name several times in his head for

good measure, "But then, out of nowhere, Ardyn Lucis Caelum's darkness blanketed the world. That's when Aqua started to worry. We knew you were in serious trouble. You needed our help. And no matter what it took, we were determined to provide it. But then, a brilliant light exploded from your heart, growing stronger with every passing second. And right as it felt like the light was about to swallow everything, Ardyn just... well... his darkness kinda disappeared."

Ryuko blinked.

Then she blinked again.

She turned towards Satsuki, who arched an eyebrow in response.

Blinking even slower a third time, she turned back to Mickey, "You tellin' me he's dead?"

"We're not quite sure."

It felt wrong saying something so vague. After everything she'd been through, Ryuko deserved peace of mind. But he couldn't. Not without lying, "Master Yen Sid spent an awful long time talkin' with the stars. But he hasn't found a single trace of his darkness in all the worlds."

So, the guy was dead.

"Well, that's good news."

As bewildered as Mickey was, Ryuko already moved onto greener pastures. And why not? Not having to worry about the psychopath was a massive weight off her shoulders. It almost made it worth getting her ass kicked. Groaning as she stretched, another yawn pushed its way out of her mouth. But halfway through the motion, she stopped, frowned, and turned back to Satsuki, "You STILL haven't explained why Gilgamesh risked his neck!"

"Simple."

Meeting her sister's gaze without flinching, Satsuki flicked a finger against her cheek, "As said the wounded lion to Androcles, Gilgamesh believed you saved his life. A debt that, until fulfilled, prevented him from rightfully earning the Scissor Blade."

"Alright! Whatever! Don't care!"

And there it was. The holier-than-thou attitude and accompanying comment. Sometimes she couldn't help but wonder if Satsuki spent hours thinking of stupid phrases or she was gifted in the art of nonsensical bullshit. But not like it mattered. And she certainly didn't care! Because whether or not Gilgamesh *thought* they were even, he was never gonna touch the Scissor Blade. If she needed to sucker punch him through a brick wall or two, so be it. As long as the guy got the goddamn point, she could live with herself.

"Thanks for the info, Mickey. Really appreciate it."

A tired wave carried what remained of her energy as she shambled back into her room. Ardyn was dead. Xehanort was probably dead. Or worse. Depending on Beatrix's mood. All was right with the world. Rubbing the back of her neck, Ryuko lazily scratched her disheveled hair. She needed to get something into her stomach. But first, she needed to change. Marching around the castle in her pajamas was against the law. Or something. Steiner probably invented the rule to piss her off.

"Oh yeah, Terra's gotta be worried sick."

The thought passed through her heart like a bullet. How could she forget about Terra? He was probably blaming himself for whatever happened back at the Keyblade Graveyard, "You mind telling him I'm fine? Since Xehanort, ya know, ruined his home, he's gotta be staying somewhere else."

There was a strange, awkward silence.

A tension thick enough that it could be cut with the Scissor Blade.

And when Satsuki didn't so much as budge an inch, Ryuko knew something was *seriously* wrong.

"I... Ryuko..."

Mickey struggled to speak. He felt lightheaded. His mouth felt like it was full of cotton. And the guilt smoldering in his heart, previously extinguished, flared with renewed life, "They're gone. Terra. Aqua. Ven. All of them. I'm... I'm sorry."

"Gone?"

It was like someone dunked her heart into ice-cold water. Anger and disbelief simultaneously flushed through her veins, one after the other. Her eyes trembled, lips slightly parted. And as her hands clenched into fists, knuckles cracking one by one under the inhuman pressure, Ryuko's voice briefly cracked, "What do you mean *gone*!?"

"Vanitas... he did something to Ven."

As much as he tried, and he did with all his heart, Mickey couldn't find the courage to look Ryuko in the eye. No matter what anyone said, he blamed himself. It was his fault. He'd been too preoccupied to notice Ryuko falling. Aqua had been the one to catch her, giving the guy an opening to knock him away. And by the time he returned to help Aqua, Vanitas already finished whatever he started. Ven's light was smothered. And in his friend's place was a horrible creature wielding a weapon that had no right to exist.

"We tried saving Ven. We knew deep down, he was still fighting. His light was just buried underneath Vanitas's darkness. Aqua could sense it. All Ven needed was some help from his friends to free himself from Vanitas's control."

He wanted to sit down.

His knees felt weak as days of self-loathing and guilt finally burst to the surface.

But taking a deep breath, Mickey forced himself to continue.

"While Aqua focused on reaching Ven's heart, I kept Vanitas busy. The X-Blade was really dangerous. A lot more dangerous than the Scissor Blade or... or... or just about anything you can imagine."

Mickey's hands trembled at the memories passing through his heart. Aqua screaming for Ven to fight back. Vanitas's insane laughter as he promised to use the X-Blade to start another Keyblade War *after* killing Ryuko and Satsuki. Aqua laying on the ground, barely conscious, Wayfinder in her bloodied fingers as Vanitas stalked towards her. And himself, desperately trying to save his friends, "Only something went wrong. Maybe Ven heard Aqua's voice. Or maybe Vanitas wasn't as strong as he thought. Because the X-Blade suddenly went haywire and shattered. There was an enormous explosion. The world shook. Everything started falling apart. And when everything stopped, we were all floating in the Lanes Between."

"That's when Gilgamesh showed up, right?"

She did her best to keep a level voice. But Mickey heard the despair prodding at the edges of her heart. And he shook his head, "No, it was a little later. Right after I brought Aqua and Ven to Yen Sid's. It must have taken a lot of effort to find you, because Gilgamesh wouldn't stop complaining. He wanted to keep the Scissor Blade. But after setting you down next to Aqua, he... kinda awkwardly... handed it over for 'safe keeping' before leaving."

"Aqua... Ven..."

A trickle of blood dripped onto the ground as Ryuko's fingernails dug into her palms, "Mickey... were they... did Vanitas..."

"Aqua only had a few cuts and bruises. Nothing too bad. But Ven..."

Yen Sid hadn't been around when Gilgamesh came and left. In fact, his master hadn't returned for almost an hour. He'd done his best to

treat Aqua, Ven and Ryuko's injuries. He'd used enough restoration magic to feel woozy. Every second had felt longer than the last. But it was the moment when Yen Sid stumbled through the door of his study, one arm limp, robes torn and noticeably exhausted, all while leaning against an equally injured Master Lulu, that was forever seared onto his heart.

"... Master Yen Sid said his heart was sleeping. Almost like it was missing... or gone."

Crunch!

Ryuko punched the wall.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Surrounding the point of impact, magically reinforced masonry shattered beneath the supernatural strength provided by her Life Fibers. She punched the wall again and again, releasing her frustrations in the only way that made sense. She didn't care if it hurt. Or if she was breaking some of her fingers. For what felt like an eternity, Ryuko stood silent. Her vision blurred from tears. The back of her throat itched. And a strange feeling passed over her heart as she lowered her arms, bloodied and bruised fingers dragging down the wall.

"Where's Terra?"

It was an otherwise simple question. Yet one that caused Satsuki considerable consternation, "We haven't found him."

How four words, meaningless by themselves, could elicit such feelings of guilt was something Satsuki intimately understood. Countless years of silently suffering at the hands of Ragyo Kiryuin's monstrous depravity afforded her perspective Mickey lacked. Her brows furrowing not from annoyance but somber worry, she strode forward, the soft clacking of her heeled boots echoing sharply as she

rested her hand, hesitating at the last moment, upon Ryuko's shoulder.

"He's gone. I'm sorry."

"Crunch!"

"That... makes... no... god... damn... sense!"

Each word was punctuated by another frustrated punch. Every subsequent hit shook the walls. Dust fell from the ceiling. The chandelier above them swayed. And by the time she finally stopped, breath ragged and lower lip trembling, Ryuko's hand was covered with blood.

"We kicked Xehanort's ass!"

As she angrily ground her knuckles deeper into the wall, Ryuko couldn't understand why this was happening. Every time they took one step forward and things started looking better, it was like something was waiting to push them two steps backwards, "No way he took down Terra!"

Satsuki struggled over what, if anything, to say.

With slightly cracked lips pursing into a soured grimace, she glanced aside, guilt manifesting as the deepening furrow of her brow. To lose one's friends and those they cherished was a deep-seated pain they were intimately familiar with. The destruction of their words at the hands of Xehanort and Vanitas hung tragically from their necks. It weighed down their hearts and minds. And yet, unlike herself, while searching for Mankanshoku and those who might have survived the darkness which subsumed their word, Ryuko had made new friends. Her sister had laughed and joked with Terra, Ven and Aqua.

It had been a second chance.

Something her sister deserved more than anything.

"If what you claim is correct, in Xehanort's condition, an explosion of such magnitude would easily have been fatal."

She considered each syllable with the patience of a linguist, "Terra knew the consequences of letting Xehanort escape. He might not have been a Keyblade Master, but he possessed the heart of one."

"Damn it!"

Crack!

"God damn it!"

Crack!

That last punch broke several of her fingers. Her hand was blazing with pain. Shattered rock covered the floor. She could feel splinters stabbing her knuckles. And faster than she could blink, her Life Fibers shifted into work. They repaired the self-inflicted damage, pushing shards of granite out of her hand. But Ryuko didn't have the energy to care. She got the message loud and clear no matter how much Satsuki sugar-coated things. Terra was gone. Ven's heart was missing or worse.

And Aqua was... was...

"Aqua..."

She stepped on pieces of rubble and other debris as her arm fell limply to her side, "What happened to her?"

"I... we don't know."

Mickey rubbed one hand against his arm. Saying something so upsetting made him feel awful, but it was the honest truth, "After she talked with Master Lulu and Yen Sid, Aqua decided to bring Ven somewhere safe. A place he could sleep until our light - yours and mine and Satsuki's - could guide his heart from the darkness. That

was the last anyone saw her. I didn't even get the chance to say goodbye."

How could Yen Sid believe he was worthy of being a Keyblade Master? Even if it wasn't his fault, when push came to shove, he hadn't been able to save Terra or Ven from Xehanort's cruel ambitions. Maybe if he pushed a little harder instead of simply accepting her decision, Aqua would have brought Ven to Alexandria or Lindblum.

"Xehanort took away our friends."

Swallowing the growing lump in his throat, Mickey steadied himself, "I'm just... gosh, I'm just happy he didn't take you too, Ryuko."

"Thanks, Mickey."

She was still upset. Not just as Xehanort, but not being there when Terra needed her the most. That wouldn't change over the span of a few seconds. But her anger had cooled to a softer simmer. And filling the large void inside her heart was a strange calmness, "I mean it. You've been my friend since the beginning. Showed me the ropes. Helped me get back on my feet after... what happened. Without you, I don't know where I might've ended up. And I'd like to believe, even if it's flat-out wrong, Satsuki only found me because of you."

Mickey rubbed the back of his neck, probably from embarrassment, while Satsuki shot her a dirty look. But she couldn't care less about her sister's opinion. Not now. Not ever. And not when something was causing her heart to beat a mile a minute.

"But if you don't mind me asking, I got another question."

A faint memory... almost like a scattered dream... whispered along the edges of her consciousness.

"How long was I actually sleeping?"

Satsuki's expression softened without her voice changing an octave.

"Thirty-two days."

The answer was like a punch to the face. A hard punch. From Mako. While she was wearing that Fight Club Goku Uniform. All without using Senketsu. A month? She'd been sleeping for an entire month? No wonder she was starving! Swallowing the nausea in the back of her throat, Ryuko leaned against the door for support. Alright, she could deal with this. It wasn't the first time she'd gotten her ass kicked hard enough to end up in a coma. Sure, it was goddamn terrible news. But at least there was the silver lining of not waking up and immediately acting like a jackass to Satsuki, Mickey and everyone within earshot.

"A month, huh? Alright..."

She took a deep breath. Closing her eyes, she focused her thoughts inwards, using the stupid lessons Beatrix shoved down her throat. And once that was finished, Ryuko shuffled into her bedroom, one hand propped against the door, "... guess there's no use getting upset. Now, if ya guys don't mind, I'll catch you later. Because right now, I need some time to think."

As the door slammed behind her sister, Satsuki closed her eyes and sighed, "Cover your ears."

"Huh?"

Confused by the strange request, Mickey quickly glanced back and forth, first at Ryuko's room and then Satsuki, who was holding both hands over her ears, "What -"

He nearly jumped out of his clothes when an ear-deafening scream ripped through the castle. A single word that reverberated across Alexandria until bouncing off the edges of the world and ricocheting back. Something that, quite quickly, brought several people sprinting up the tower to investigate.

"FUCK!!!"

Chapter 10.4

While I'm cutting away from Ryuko for a moment, I want to thank [W34v3r](#). There's a certain word you introduced a while back that I couldn't help but use. So, credit where credit's due. But in all seriousness, I thought long and hard about everything I wrote below. Ansem the Wise is the ruler of Radiant Garden. Which means he should have a good idea of what's happening throughout the city. So, something like the events taking place in Chapters 6 and 7 should have come to his attention. A little bit of reality all but forcibly introduced.

[img:

https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kingdomhearts/images/5/59/Braig_Xehanort.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20170328161805]

"I've been looking all over for you..."

An almost exuberant smirk stretched across Braig's scarred face as he wrapped his arm around the figure paying more attention to the boring clipboard than his most trusted assistant.

"... mister master."

Counting to five inside his head, he gave the guy - well, more of a means to an end - time to counter with some form of condescending remark. A thread. Or perhaps a warning to keep his distance until things cooled down. After all, the old coot was probably more than a little peeved he hightailed it out of the Keyblade Graveyard when Ryuko appeared out of literally nowhere. But in his defense, unless there was no other choice, and that was a really iffy question, standing his ground against that particularly inhuman keyslinger was the last thing on his mind.

"Gotta say, that amnesia excuse you gave His Lordship was pretty good. Hell, if I wasn't in the loop, I'd swear you were actually serious."

He expected the formerly old-as-bones geezer to say something. Maybe a threat to keep his voice down. Anything, to be fair. But contrary to his hopes, the guy seemed completely and utterly baffled. Confused. Puzzled, even.

"Wait, don't tell me you really *were* serious."

It took serious effort not to slap himself in the face. Geez, out of everything that could have possibly gone wrong, the geezer had to lose his goddamn memory. Aqua, or whatever miss eternal sunshine's name was, must've done a real number on the old man's heart for him to forget everything but his name. This was one hell of a setback. Of course, it could have been worse. Amnesia or not, on the bright side, Xehanort hadn't kicked the bucket.

Which meant there was still a chance to salvage the plan.

"Boy, this is some stupid cliché."

A strange thought suddenly tickled his heart.

"Hey..."

Tightening his hold around Xehanort's shoulders - or perhaps, *not* Xehanort - while covertly reaching for the arrowgun on the small of his back, Braig grimaced. Maybe this was nothing more than nerves. Hell, he was probably overreacting. But what if he wasn't? He'd underestimated Ryuko as a snot-nosed keyslinger. And look where that got him. Missing one eye and face permanently disfigured. Not that he really cared about his looks. The scar made him look dignified.

And yet, narrowing his remaining eye and pulling Xehanort closer, he carefully asked, "You're not... Terra, are you?"

The lack of recognition when Xehanort shrugged off his arm, refusing to say anything outside of a dirty look, was one hell of a relief.

"Heh... as if! Sorry. Had to check."

Whistling under his breath, he threw his head back and chuckled. What the hell had he been thinking? As if Terra could successfully regain control of his body from Xehanort. The old coot's heart was simply too powerful. And thanks to the geezer's darkness, which wasn't quite as monstrous as Ryuko's, the desperate keyslinger hadn't stood a chance.

"Anyway, don't sweat it. Your old pal Braig's got your back. Just leave everything to *me*..."

Now that he wasn't worried about Terra somehow getting revenge, he could sit back and relax. It would take some time to get the plan back on track. But time was the one thing he had in abundance. Chuckling in the back of his throat while Xehanort, for whatever reason lurked within his currently blank mind, quirked an eyebrow in confusion, Braig playfully slapped the amnesic on the back, unaware of the group of people emerging from an adjacent corridor.

"Hmm..."

Ansem the Wise glanced over the data, charts, scribbled addendums and hand-written formulas Even spent the last few weeks gathering. Dragging a finger across one particular equation his eldest apprentice had deemed gravely important, he couldn't help but express his utmost astonishment. The implications were extraordinary. To understand the mysteries of the heart was a goal older than himself. It was risky, as was all science, but such an intriguing line of research might provide the necessary breakthrough for unlocking the memories buried within Xehanort's heart.

"I take it the repairs are proceeding on schedule?"

But such matters could wait until more pressing issues were dealt with.

"The structure damage was superficial. However, estimates suggest two to three weeks, at minimum, to finish re-sanitizing purification chamber three."

Walking side-by-side with Ansem, clipboard tucked under one arm while the other prevented lenzo's sea salt ice cream from splattering over the clean floors, Even grimaced at the half-melted liquid covering his fingers, "As long as chambers one, two, four and five remain operational, nobody should notice the loss of output. Erring on the side of caution, I've assigned Dilan as facility guard until better means of preventing intrusions have been implemented."

"And Braig?"

"His recollection remains consistent," as he finished wiping the last traces of melted ice cream on a handkerchief, Even placed it back into his pocket before shifting his attention towards the scarred guard walking in the opposite direction, "After spotting someone lurking around the Outer Gardens, he proceeded to chase them into the Purification Facility. The last thing he remembers before regaining consciousness near the central square is a monstrous darkness."

"First that thief. Now this."

That day had been an incomprehensible disaster. It was a miracle nobody lost their lives. From the moment dawn breached the horizon until the last traces of sunlight vanished into the darkening skies, Radiant Garden had been engulfed in violence. Horrid monsters lurking through the streets. An assassin attacking one of his guards. A masked youth confronting three teenagers, two of which bore Keyblades and a third wielding something eyewitnesses could only described as a 'Sword Scissor.'

There was no doubt in his heart the events were connected.

But *how*, Ansem grimaced, was the critical question.

"I thank the stars Braig escaped with his life. The next victim might not be so fortunate."

Affording lenzo, who could sense the turbulence roiling his heart, a more than reassuring smile, Ansem gently rustled the boy's hair, "Until this criminal's apprehended, neither you nor lenzo or even Xehanort are permitted to enter town without escort. I couldn't bear the guilt if anything should happen to you on my watch."

"As you wish."

Even nodded, more out of respect than necessity, at the undeniable order. Not that he could blame Lord Ansem's worry. If not for that young man bearing the Keyblade, the same youth whose heart had been artificially stripped clean of darkness, lenzo might have suffered injury at the claws of those horrible creatures. Not to mention he, himself, nearly broke his nose upon running head-first into another Keyblade wielder, the *same* teenager who'd sought audience with Lord Ansem earlier than morning. A most peculiar coincidence, perhaps something deserving investigation.

"Incidentally, I've been researching something discovered at the scene."

Narrowing his eyes, he handed Ansem the clipboard under his arm, "Standard experiments, of course. Nothing requiring your authorization. Although I'm certain you'll be interested in what I've found."

"Oh?"

His apprentice's excitement was modestly intriguing. He quirked an eyebrow, coughing in the back of his throat. But as he examined the data filling more than a dozen pages, flipping back and forth with increasing rapidity, Ansem stopped mid-stride, disbelief pulsing through his heart, "These results... are you absolutely certain?"

"There's no mistake."

Modest arrogance clashed with genuine caution within Even's heart, "I've eliminated any possible sources of error, artificial or otherwise."

"Incredible. Simply incredible."

The data was breathtaking. Whatever his apprentice discovered, it was extraordinary. Unlike anything he'd seen before. Yet some of the results didn't make sense. And that garnered his attention. Even had conducted several experiments designed to output identical, or close to it, results. Tenebrispectroscopy. Lumenspectroscopy. And others. But the data pertaining to those experiments were contradictory. Paradoxical, one could say. As though the material went against everything known to modern science. Something affiliated with the light shouldn't have the same affiliation with the darkness. Yet not only had Even discovered such a contradiction, identical experiments produced differing results.

But it was something at the bottom of the second-to-last page which caught Ansem's attention.

"A class-four security precaution? That seems a tad..."

Clasping the corner of a page, his eyes widened at the impossible, or perhaps thought to be impossible, data, "It's a *thaumavore*?"

"A little more than one-tenth of an ounce was recovered at the scene of Braig's... assault."

Even as the words left his mouth, the middle-aged scientist had difficulty concealing a well-worn grimace. Curiosity was one thing. The discovery of a lifetime another. What he wouldn't give for such a momentous opportunity. But the substance discovered in the Purification Facility was concerning. No, perhaps eldritch was a better word, "Upon collection, I secured it within an enchanted lockbox in my study. Three weeks later, not only was the

enchantment *gone*, when I reweighed the material, it had *doubled* in total mass."

A short pause demarcated the sudden tension in his voice, "Subsequent experiments confirmed my suspicions. Almost like a parasite, the substance creates more of itself through *eating* magic."

It was almost as if Ansem aged several years in a single moment.

"I'm authorizing further research on these... parasites."

Thaumavores weren't supposed to exist. They were nothing more than philosophical concepts argued by inquisitive minds. Fantastical creatures conceived as thought experiments. The notion that such monsters no longer belonged to the realm of imagination, but somehow found their way onto Radiant Garden, was immensely troubling, "Any developments are to be shared immediately, no matter how insignificant they may seem. I want to know exactly what we're dealing with."

Original Version

"I've been looking all over for you..."

A broad, almost exuberant smirk stretched across Braig's scarred and damaged face as he wrapped his arm around the solitary figure paying more attention to the boring clipboard than his most trusted assistant.

"... mister master."

Counting to five, he gave his comrade - well, more of a superior than friend - time to retort with some form of condescending remark. A threat. Or maybe a warning to keep his distance until things cooled down. After all, the old man was probably still pissed he highailed it out of the wastelands when that bitch appeared out of nowhere. If little miss optimist had done anything to get between Xehanort and Terra, their hard work wouldn't been for nothing. And *he* would've gotten his ass handed to him *with* interest. But in his

defense, unless there was no other choice, no way, no how was he going to stand his ground against that monstrous keyslinger.

Not when she could *regrow* half her head.

In addition to that whole business wiping Ardyn freaking Izunia from the face of goddamn existence.

"Gotta say, that amnesia excuse you gave His Lordship was pretty good."

Patting the self-professed Xehanort on the back, the treacherous guard chuckled triumphantly, "Hell, if I wasn't in the loop, I'd swear you were being serious."

He expected the formerly old-as-bones geezer to say something. Anything, really. Instead, the guy seemed puzzled. Almost confused.

"Wait, don't tell me you really *were* serious."

It took self-restraint for Braig not to slap himself in the face. Xehanort's vacant expression said enough. Out of everything that could have possibly happened, the geezer had to lose his goddamn memory. Aqua, or whatever miss eternal sunshine's name was, must've done a real number on the old man's heart for him to forget everything but his name. Of course, it could have been a lot worse. Amnesia or not, on the bright side, the bastard hadn't kicked the bucket. Since the Keyblade Master had been Terra's friend, she probably held back out of stupidity and naivety. The 'power of friendship' or something equally moronic.

Which meant there was still a chance to salvage their plan.

"Boy, this is some cliché."

A disturbing thought suddenly tickled Braig's heart.

And nightmarish terror gripped his mind like a vice until he couldn't breathe.

"Hey..."

Maybe it was nothing more than his shot nerves. These days, he got jumpy whenever a teenager dyed their hair anything close to the color red. But still, he had to know. Because if the old man's plan had gone up in smoke, escaping with his arms and legs firmly attached to his body was his number one priority. And then hunkering down in some backwater world off the beaten path when that monstrous bitch inevitably realizes his role in Xehanort's failed scheme. No way was he going to stand around and let *her* get anywhere near him! He was not that stupid.

Tightening his hold around Xehanort's shoulders - or perhaps, *not* Xehanort - while covertly reaching for the arrowgun latched onto the small of his back, Braig's unscarred eye visibly narrowed, "You're not... Terra, are you?"

The utter lack of recognition in the 'amnesiac' apprentice's eyes when the guy shrugged off his arm, refusing to say so much as a word, was one hell of a relief.

"Heh... as if! Sorry. Had to check."

For a moment, he'd honestly expected Xehanort or Terra to summon their fancy Keyblade. Sure, he might have the power of darkness dancing at his fingertips thanks to the old geezer's last-minute gift. But staring down a pissed keyslinger was a little beyond his current pay grade. But now he felt stupid. As if Terra's heart could overpower Xehanort's powerful but not quite as nightmarish as that terrifying bitch's darkness. No way. Not a freaking chance.

"Anyway, don't sweat it. Your old pal Braig's got your back. Just leave everything to *me*..."

Laughing at the unstated joke while Xehanort, for whatever reason lurked in his currently blank mind, quirked an eyebrow in confusion, Braig slapped the man on the back, unaware of the familiar group of people emerging from an adjacent corridor.

"Hmm..."

An introspective frown graced Ansem the Wise's façade as he stared at the data, charts, scribbled addendum, hand-written formulas and miscellaneous information Even had helpfully provided. Dragging a finger across one particular set of equations his eldest apprentice deigned of grave importance, he grew more impressed with every number. The implications were extraordinary. To understand the mysteries of the heart was a goal as old as time itself. Perhaps such an intriguing line of research could provide the necessary breakthrough for unlocking the memories buried within Xehanort's heart.

"The repairs are proceeding on schedule?"

But such matters could wait until more pressing issues were attended.

"The structural damage was superficial. However, it will take another two weeks, at minimum, to finish re-sanitizing purification chamber three."

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There was no doubt in his heart the events were connected.

But *how*, Ansem grimaced, was the critical question.

"It was only thanks to his incredible skill that Braig escaped with his life. The next victim might not be so fortunate."

Affording lenzo, who could sense the turbulence roiling his heart, a more than reassuring smile, Ansem gently rustled the boy's hair. And once the young boy was content, turned back to his eldest apprentice, "Until this criminal's apprehended, neither you nor lenzo or even Xehanort are permitted to enter town without escort. I couldn't bear the guilt if anything should happen to you on my watch."

"As you wish."

Even nodded, more out of respect than necessity, at the undeniable order. Not that he could blame Lord Ansem's worry. It was legitimate, after all. If not for that young man bearing the Keyblade, whose heart had been artificially stripped clean of darkness, Ienzo might have suffered injury at the hands of those horrible creatures. And he, himself, almost broke his nose upon running into another Keyblade wielder, the *same* woman who'd earlier that morning attempted to seek audience with Lord Ansem, who'd been in an awful hurry.

"Incidentally, I've begun researching something discovered at the scene."

Narrowing his eyes, he handed Ansem the clipboard under his arm, "Standard experiments, of course. Nothing requiring your authorization. Although I'm certain you'll be interested in what I've found."

"Oh?"

His apprentice's excitement was modestly intriguing. He quirked an eyebrow, coughing in the back of his throat. But as he examined the data filling more than a dozen pages, flipping back and forth with increasing rapidity, Ansem stopped mid-stride, disbelief pulsing through his heart, "These results... are you absolutely certain?"

"There's no mistake."

Well-earned arrogance clashed with genuine scientific pride as Ienzo stoically nodded, "I triple-checked for possible sources of error, artificial or otherwise."

"Incredible. Simply incredible."

The data was breathtaking. Whatever his apprentice discovered, it was extraordinary. Unlike anything he'd seen before. Yet some of the results didn't make sense. And that garnered his attention. Even he had conducted several experiments designed to output identical, or

close to it, results. Tenebrispectroscopy. Lumenspectroscopy. And others. But the data pertaining to those experiments were contradictory. Paradoxical, one could say. As though the material went against everything known to modern science. Something affiliated with the light shouldn't have the same affiliation with the darkness. Yet not only had Even discovered such a contradiction, identical experiments produced differing results.

But it was something at the bottom of the second-to-last page which caught Ansem's undivided attention.

"A class-four security precaution? That seems a tad..."

Clasping the corner of a page between his fingers, Ansem's eyes widened at the impossible, or perhaps thought to be impossible, data, "It's a *thaumavore*?"

"There was a little over one-tenth of an ounce surrounding the scene of Braig's... injury."

The middle-aged scientist had trouble concealing the trepidation lurking inside his heart. Scientific curiosity was one thing. The discovery of a lifetime another. But the substance found in the aftermath of Braig's assault was concerning. No, *eldritch* was a better word, "Under standard containment protocols, I secured it inside a magically-enchanted lockbox within my study. Three weeks later, not only was the box's enchantment *gone*, when I re-weighed the substance, it had *doubled* in total mass."

Even's eyes narrowed as he, however briefly, lowered his voice to a tense whisper, "And subsequent experiments confirmed my suspicions. Almost like a parasite, the substance creates more of itself by *eating* magic."

"I'm authorizing further research on these... parasites."

Thaumavore's weren't supposed to exist. They were merely fantastical creatures. A philosophical experiment designed to be

argued by wandering minds. That they not only existed but somehow found their way onto Radiant Garden severely bothered Ansem, "Keep me informed of any developments, no matter how insignificant they might seem. I want to know what we're dealing with."

Last edited: Jan 29, 2019

Chapter 10.5

"To safeguard the light mustn't mean we need eradicate the darkness. For without darkness to grant perspective, how can light exist?"

~Master Celes Chere

A moss-covered stone bounced across the water.

Splash! Splash! Splash! Ploink!

As the ripples collided with each other, Ryuko flicked her wrist, sending another rock skipping towards Alexandria.

Splash! Splash! Splash! Splash! Ploink!

Reaching for another rock from the ever-shrinking pile next to her leg, she couldn't help but grumble, expression set into a permanent grimace.

Everything still felt a little surreal. Almost like this was nothing more than another dream. A month? How could she have been knocked into a goddamn coma for an entire month? The last time something knocked her flat onto her ass that badly, Ragyo Kiryuin beat the shit out of Satsuki, ripped out her beating heart for the entire world to see and bragged about being her dear old mom. But nothing like that happened against Ardyn. Or had it? Mickey said something about an overwhelming light blasting the bastard into nothingness. And that it came from her heart.

But that wasn't helpful when she couldn't remember anything.

Splash! Splash! Ploink!

"What am I even doing?"

Angrily chucking another rock into the water with a solid *ploink*, Ryuko slouched forward, holding her head in her hands. And grumbled. She felt like a bitch. No, scratch that. She was a bitch. There was no denying it. Because she really messed things up. Satsuki must've been worried sick. After Yen Sid or Mickey told her about Ven, even if she believed everything would turn out alright, Satsuki had probably assumed the worst while hoping for the best. That was just her big sis worked. She *knew* that. And what did she do? She bulldozed her way out of the castle, refusing to talk with Satsuki or Mickey or anyone else.

And Mickey...

Ploink!

She shrugged off the wind biting at her cheeks as another rock left her fingers. Mickey had only been trying to help. He wasn't being rude or obnoxious. He didn't have a mean bone in his body. She blamed herself for Aqua, Terra and Ven being gone. Because it was her fault. She was the idiot who forgot about Ardyn Izunia being batcrap crazy. But Mickey? Even if she grabbed his jacket and screamed in his face, he'd still take the blame.

The guy was that nice.

Splash! Splash! Splash! Ploink!

As the last rock in the once large pile bounced across the moat, skipping more than enough times to smack against the wooden docks hundreds of feet away, Ryuko threw her shoulders back, grumbled and pushed herself onto her feet. There wasn't any point thinking about that bullshit. Even if everything was her fault, she had to remain focused. Ardyn had kicked the bucket. Xehanort was six feet under. And while she hated everything about *how* it happened, Vanitas was gone.

Maybe things could have gone down differently, but her world had been avenged.

Xehanort would never harm anyone else.

She could finally focus on what was truly important - finding Mako.

"Finally awake, Ryuko?"

It felt like someone clenched her heart in an iron vice. A cold shiver trickled down her back. Disbelieving eyes widened at the familiar voice. But surprise twisted into anger faster than her teeth clenched into a snarl. Mentally punching herself for leaving the Scissor Blade back in her room, Ryuko pivoted, crimson light weaving between her fingers, "What the hell!?"

"Your sister said you would be here."

Beatrix's purplish-red eye narrowed as she descended the mossy steps leading towards the docks where gondolas normally waited to bring guards and staff into the city. The clack-snap of her armored boots echoed softly over the nearby bubbling fountain, leaves and dying algae filling the once pristine waters, "Are you alright?"

"Oh... uh..."

Confusion coursed through Ryuko's heart as the light around her fingers disappeared. For a moment, she blinked, unable to understand what happened. Or *why* it happened. She had to still be groggy. Yeah, that was it. Nothing else made sense. Especially when she was hallucinating voices. And when her master didn't say anything but continued looking with a strange expression in her eye, she exhaled loudly, "I don't know. Yes? No! Maybe? All of the above!"

Throwing her hands into the air, Ryuko gave up trying to answer the question, "But it doesn't matter how I feel. Not when I gotta apologize to -"

She stopped, eyes widening and annoyance fading to dying embers, upon noticing what should have been obvious from the start.

"Yes..."

Without saying much of anything outside a noncommittal answer, the Keyblade Master shrugged off her student's bewilderment. It was impossible to blame Ryuko's reaction. Not when the girl and half the known universe believed she was the closest thing to invincible. But that impossible status aside, for no one was invincible, not her nor Ardyn Izunia or the deadliest Heartless, the loss of her right arm was an irritating hindrance. If not for Steiner's unwavering assistance with even the most mundane and trivial tasks, things that would have been easy but a month ago, her life would have devolved into chaos.

"The Cloud of Darkness was, shall we say, quite formidable."

In the Lanes Between, forced onto the offensive by the necessity of the situation, she'd thrown herself at the Heartless with unrelenting ferocity. The creature's darkness had grown with every second, as if responding to her light with equivalent reciprocity. Flying through the infinite space between worlds, either through her own power or Save the Queen whenever the Cloud of Darkness broke away, she'd unleashed waves of light upon the creature, drawing its attention while Yen Sid and Lulu wove what could best be described as tapestries of multi-elemental magic.

Over and over again, she attacked the massive creature without restraint, dodging beams of spiraling darkness and Heartless drawn out of the shadows by its mere presence.

All while Merlin poured his heart and soul into something she couldn't begin to comprehend.

"If not for Yen Sid and Lulu's assistance, as well as Merlin's invaluable wisdom, sending the Heartless back whence it came would have been next to impossible."

At the end, half-blinded by the thick streams of blood running down her temple and having sacrificed her right arm protecting Yen Sid, she had been the only one standing between the Heartless and its

objective - a random, otherwise inconsequential world. A realm full of light and hope. A place full of innocents unable to sense the massive darkness approaching their home. And it was there, buying time for Merlin to finish, memories of Ryuko's world's fate granting her conviction, that she stood her ground.

"Holy Shock!"

"But even so, victory came with a price."

Bitterness swelled in the back of Ryuko's throat as her mouth opened and closed, "I... shit..."

A somber sigh summarized Beatrix's commentary as she shook her head, thick curls of chestnut brown shifting alongside the movement, "It wasn't your fault. Even if you had disobeyed my orders, your presence would have only served as a distraction."

"I know that!"

Clenching her hands until her knuckles bled white, Ryuko stared at a random crack on the ground. She didn't blame herself for the Cloud of Darkness. She had wanted to help. She had planned to help despite Beatrix's orders and whatever Satsuki said. But seeing her master without an arm, something that seemed so *wrong*, changed everything. The denial died in the back of her throat. And her heart felt like someone was squeezing it between their fingers.

"It's just... to you and Satsuki, that stuff happened last month. But to me, it's like everything happened yesterday."

For what felt like an eternity but couldn't have been more than a few seconds, Ryuko couldn't figure out what else to say. The words were coming faster and faster, almost like someone turned a faucet inside her heart to full blast. It made sense why Beatrix came to her. Out of everyone, she was the only one who knew what really happened. Mickey had been there. But she had fought Xehanort from the very beginning.

"I'm guessing Mickey told you everything?"

"To a certain extent," Beatrix concurred without inflection, "But you know more, don't you?"

"Yeah..."

Ryuko tightly nodded as her voice, despite her best efforts to keep everything under control, cracked, "That afternoon, after me and Satsuki got separated, I somehow ended up in front of Terra's home. Only the place was messed up. Like a hurricane tore through everything. Darkness was everywhere. It felt like I was *breathing* in the stuff. And Ardyn... that psychotic bastard... strolled out the front door claiming he was looking for something!"

A slight trickle of blood oozed between her fingers, "There was a lot of nonsense, but he made damn sure to mention Xehanort freeing that Heartless!"

"I see..."

Although her student's uncharacteristic behavior was concerning, Beatrix pursed her lips at a particular piece of information. Something whose significance she was certain Ryuko was blissfully unaware of. Nothing of value to someone such as Ardyn Lucis Caelum laid sealed within the Land of Departure nor castle. Everything related to Regent Cid Fabool's ancestors and lineage was secured in Lindblum or Alexandria. Unless, and her eye narrowed at the thought, the man had sought something different. An archaism bearing no meaning to anyone besides himself.

Yet his destruction at the hands of her student rendered such questions unanswerable.

"While we suspected Xehanort's involvement, your confirmation lays any remaining doubts to rest."

The scars crisscrossing Beatrix's shoulder stung as she gingerly cupped her chin, "Unfortunately, determining what, if anything, Ardyn sought will be impossible."

"Huh?"

Ryuko *hadn't* expected outright refusal, "Why not?"

"Since the age of fairy tales, light and darkness have existed in perfect harmony upon the Land of Departure. For generations, Eraqus and countless other masters have safeguarded the world from those who would seek to abuse such neutrality."

In response to the infuriated yet confused inquiry, the Keyblade Master shook her head. Long-forgotten memories, once relegated to the depths of her heart simply through the relentless march of time, surfaced as she remembered, after so many years, the minute details of her conversations with Eraqus, "However, if it were necessary, the stewards developed a particular trick to, in a sense, 'lock' the Keyhole, transfiguring the Land of Departure into something utterly unrecognizable to you and me."

"Lock, huh?"

The explanation was straight-forward and easy to understand. She could follow Beatrix's story from start to finish. At some point between getting separated from her sis and waking up in bed, someone turned the Land of Departure into some sort of chaotic and messed-up puzzle. Maybe a maze or funhouse mirror room. Which was the sort of bullshit strategy Satsuki and her nerdy friend... Inumuta... would come up with. An emergency, last-minute 'fuck you' to anyone looking for an easy win. Satsuki was probably jealous she hadn't thought of that for Honnouji Academy.

But something didn't make sense.

It couldn't have been Eraqus who changed the place. She was certain of that. Just like she was certain Beatrix was telling the truth.

But if he didn't do it, then who...

"Aqua!"

And just like that, in the middle of trying to figure out the answer to a question missing half the words, Ryuko's heart leapt into her throat, "I gotta tell Mickey!"

"He already knows."

Beatrix's expression tightened at the strange nostalgia tickling her heart. Genuine suspicions created over years of experience fighting against the darkness ever-seeking to drag the light into perpetual nothingness clashed with concerns and worry simmering within the depths of her heart. Xehanort. The traitor's name still evoked visceral bitterness. If Eraqus's apprentice hadn't sacrificed himself, she would have ended the man's life herself. Nothing less would have sufficed as punishment for such a monster.

"It was one of the first places he looked."

And again, hidden by thick curled bangs of chestnut brown hair, her eye narrowed at Ryuko's expression. A finger twitched. An imperceptible hiss passed between her lips. And without warning, Save the Queen manifested into physical existence alongside a sharp eruption of ruby light.

["Bring out your Keyblade."](#)

Acting purely by instinct, self-preservation taking charge over higher thinking, Ryuko leapt backwards, clearing most of the moat before her sneakers touched water. She knew that tone better than anyone. It brought back memories. Painful memories of Beatrix effortlessly kicking the crap out of her. Memories of throwing everything at the swordswoman only to have her attacks do absolutely nothing.

Small ripples constantly licked at her ankles as she skidded across the surface of the water. Waves kicked up in her wake, soaking the

bottom of her pants. Grimacing between clenched teeth upon coming to a complete stop, eyes focused squarely on the Keyblade Master standing across the moat, Threadcutter appeared in her waiting fingers. But despite weighing close to nothing, the Keyblade felt heavy. Her arm felt like it weighed a ton

In fact, her entire body seemed to have doubled or tripled in weight.

"Oh crap!"

By the time she realized the truth, Beatrix was already moving. The swordswoman's foot touched the water's surface. A shimmer of light danced within her remaining eye. And moving faster than humanly possible, left arm curled across her body and waves of water exploding in her wake, the one-armed master launched herself forward.

"S-Shit!"

Kept afloat by nothing more than sheer speed, Beatrix relaxed her fingers as she closed the distance between herself and Ryuko, allowing Save the Queen to dissipate into motes of soft light. With her purplish-red eye narrowed, she *warped* through Threadcutter when Ryuko swung with desperate strength, leaving more than cascading ripples as evidence of her existence before, having already pivoted sharply, reappearing behind the bewildered teenager.

"Gah!"

Her palm smashed into the small of Ryuko's back before reality abruptly shifted itself into a fine, glue-like paste. In the blink of an eye, the familiar smells clinging to Alexandria proper were replaced with the soothing scent of sea salt and mist rising from the cliffs to the east. The moat underneath their feet transformed into an expansive field of swaying grass extending towards the castle and city near the horizon.

And Ryuko, either through Beatrix's magnanimity or her Life Fibers finally getting their act together, found her face scrapping through the grassy field when the gravity magic dispelled.

"Bearing the Keyblade is an honor coveted by many but afforded to few."

Her footsteps left faint imprints upon the damp grass as Save the Queen once more manifested within her clenched fingers, "A Keyblade is the manifestation of one's heart. It represents the light which guides one's heart into the future. And the darkness which binds one's thoughts to the past."

Spitting out the dirt that managed to get inside her mouth, Ryuko stabbed Threadcutter into the ground. Blood trickled from her nose. The taste of copper clung to her tongue. Normally feathery hair lay matted against her forehead, coated with sweat and water. Gasping for breath, several choice curses carrying themselves upon the wind, she tightened her grasp around Threadcutter, gripping its handle until the metal threatened to break, and forced herself to stand.

"I'm not in the mood for a lecture!"

CLANG!

Beatrix's chestnut brown hair swayed as she intercepted her student's Keyblade without moving so much as an inch. Despite the white-hot flames surrounding Threadcutter, she remained resolute and unyielding. An immovable object. Against an average opponent, or perhaps even a gifted one, such ferocity would have proven decisive.

But even after losing her dominant arm, the difference in strength, experience and skill between herself and Ryuko remained substantial.

"Have you forgotten your lessons?"

A twist of her wrist dissipated the flames around Threadcutter while deflecting Ryuko's innately superior physical strength. She could tell her student had grown stronger, both in terms of actual strength and the light within her heart. But neither of those improvements stopped Save the Queen nor induced hesitation into her heart when the greyish-black magic rippling along the shaft of her Keyblade smashed into Ryuko's stomach.

"Or has darkness clouded your heart and mind?"

Her purplish-red eye narrowed not at the drop of blood splattering against her sleeveless dust, but how quickly Ryuko recovered. For an appreciable frame of time, Beatrix watched the teenager stagger backwards yet retain her composure. Her fingers tightened at Ryuko's endless stream of profanities. Her right foot shifted an imperceptible inch when the blood trickling from Ryuko's mouth vanished.

CLANG!

And pivoting on the spot, her arm barely quivered as Save the Queen parried Threadcutter, "What is your answer, Ryuko?"

"Shut up!"

Beatrix allowed her heart to guide her movements. Barely taking a single step backwards, forward or sideways, she blocked, parried, deflected or outright avoided Threadcutter. Ryuko's speed and strength were commendable. And her technique, despite having less than a single month of formal training, was nearly perfect. But to her, Ryuko might have been holding a wooden Keyblade. Or nothing at all. Such was the effort required to deflect Threadcutter, abruptly twist her wrist counterclockwise, cross one foot over the other and smash her Keyblade into the underside of Ryuko's chin.

"Humph, I expected better of you."

Pain.

Anger.

Confusion.

Many different and conflicting emotions spun through Ryuko's heart as she slammed against the ground. The impact forced her back upwards, sending blood and spittle spewing between her lips. Thick and wet coughs wracked her lungs. Her fingers curled against the dirt, clenching handfuls of soil and grass. And wincing as her Life Fiber fixed enough of the damage to finally roll onto her stomach, she gasped while slowly, excruciatingly so, standing back on her feet. The glint in Beatrix's eyes was familiar. It was something that would have made Nui Harime or hell, on a really bad day, Ragyo Kiryuin stop and think about their life choices.

"What... the hell's... your problem?"

CLANG!

In some corner of her mind, where she wasn't focused on fighting, Ryuko was impressed she saw it coming. Her body had moved independently of her thoughts. With one hand holding Threadcutter and the other propped against its blade, she blocked Save the Queen.

Only for the raw power behind the one-handed swing to nearly buckle her knees.

"My problem, Ryuko..."

It was like fighting Ragyo Kiryuin without Senketsu. But dealing with Beatrix's inhuman strength was something she could do it any day of the week. It was the strange disappointment that threw off her game.

Shink!

"... is that you're blaming yourself for something you couldn't have possibly changed."

And just like that, the battle, if it could be called something so trivial, was finished. Unable to move, not because of the Keyblade pressing against her throat but the feeling coming from the swordswoman's heart, Ryuko didn't say anything. She couldn't say anything as Beatrix's expression softened into something familiar, "Being unable to save your friends is a terrible feeling. You blame yourself. You spend hours desperately looking for something you could have changed. You obsess over it. You wonder what's the point of strength if it can't protect anyone."

Sunlight clung to Save the Queen, granting the rose-colored sword brilliance akin to flames, as Keyblade Master lowered her Keyblade, "There are times when one needs to accept the burden of responsibility. And there are times when one must accept things simply do not unfold as they dreamt. The only person at fault for the tragedy which befell your friends is Xehanort. Not Mickey nor your sister. Not Ardyn Izunia. And certainly not you."

"I..."

Just like that, almost as if hearing someone say it, Ryuko felt the strange weight on her heart disappear. Why the hell had she been kicked herself in the ass? She had given one hundred and ten percent against Xehanort, hadn't she? She'd tried her damn hardest from start to finish! From the moment she punched Vanitas through his stupid helmet to her final memories of Ardyn yanking her to the ground with chains of darkness, she hadn't stopped fighting. She hadn't given into despair or hopelessness even after Ardyn stabbed her in the back. Nothing she did, or could have done, changed one simple fact. And she felt like a moron for needing Beatrix point out something so goddamn obvious.

Everything was Xehanort's fault.

And the bastard was dead.

So why the hell was she blaming herself?

"Now then, if you're done sulking, I believe this match is far from concluded."

Taking several measured steps before turning around, Beatrix scoffed at the awkward confusion plastered upon Ryuko's face, "However, don't presume the loss of my arm to be anything more than a slight handicap."

An eyebrow twitched at the terrible joke.

"You planned this from the start, didn't you?"

The playful glint in her master's eye completely ruined the moment. She should have expected something like this. Grumbling under her breath, she wiped the back of her hand against her chin. She appreciated Beatrix's help. She really did. Whether she liked it or not, the woman had a way with getting the point across, "Not that I don't appreciate you helping me get over myself, but let's get one thing straight! I don't care your arm's gone! That ain't gonna stop me from beating the crap out of you!"

"Oh?"

Beatrix's laughter was like twinkling glass, "Well, I suppose there's a first time for everything..."

Last edited: Jan 12, 2019

Chapter 10.6

I want everyone to know I planned this from the beginning. Sure, some of the details changed. And yes. The discussions on the thread inspired a few cosmetic changes. But the overall idea? Planned since I decided to expand my one-shot into a story.

The extravagant, almost cartoonish, sign depicting a stylized moogles holding a blacksmith's hammer flashed in the afternoon sunlight.

ELMINA'S WORKSHOP

And directly underneath the multicolored neon letters, multiple hues of red, blue, green and purple catching the attention of valuable customers, hand-written on weather-proofed cards by hands much smaller than those belonging to normal humans, were two smaller signs.

Open 9:00 AM - 9:00 PM

NO DISCOUNTS, KUPO!!!

With one final *whack* of the orichalcum hammer, Elmina wiped a stubby arm across his soot-covered fur. After working all morning on the latest order, including skipping breakfast to fix a few minor adjustments, he was finished. All that remained was product testing. But that could wait until a little later. Hanging the hammer on the hook above the anvil, he removed his sapphire goggles, thick mithril gloves and matching blacksmith's apron. It was almost noon, which meant Market Street was full of paying customers waiting to hand over their Gil for life-saving and beneficial accessories, items and equipment.

But as his stomach rumbled, all thoughts of further entrepreneurial success vanished.

"Whew!"

Grabbing the small knapsack next to the forge, he patted down his hands, gave his wings a nice long stretch and sighed before waddling around boxes full of ingredients and materials ordered straight from Mognet Central.

"I'm off to lunch, kupo!"

The aroma of roasted Kupo Nuts, lightly seasoned with nine different herbs and spices, caused his pom-pom to stiffen. He was positively giddy with anticipation! But keeping his hunger under control, which wasn't easy for a moogle of his stature, he marched through the small door concealed underneath the front counter of his workshop. As his super sensitive hearing picked up several conversations between humans about what they needed for their homes, all of which he mentally jotted in the back of his mind for future reference, Elmina readjusted the knapsack over his shoulder.

"Oh!"

Turning around when an intense wave of existential dread washed over his heart, he waved at his assistant, barely on the job for less than a month yet already the single best investment of his career, "If the new materials arrive while I'm gone, please make sure they don't drop them on the ground, kupo!"

"Don't you worry, boss!"

His assistant, a peppy and polite teenager, smiled, "You can count on me!"

Simply remembering that awful day worsened his anxiety. Tens of thousands of Gil spent on rare ingredients only for the courier from Mognet Central to drop everything right outside his door. Sure, it had been an accident. The moogle had stepped on a pothole in the road. But the potential business loss had been tremendous! If Artemicion hadn't sent a heartfelt and sincere apology, plus replacement ingredients free of charge, he might have gone bankrupt!

"Hmm... hmm... hmm..."

As she watched her boss disappear into the growing crowd of humans meandering through Twilight Town's streets with neither purpose nor reason for existence, the assistant's friendly smile turned mischievous. Perfectly manicured fingers, nails painted a beautiful shade of pink, strummed against the counter's pock-marked mahogany surface while a soft yet familiar tune passed through her lips. To an incredibly rude and inconsiderable person committing one of the ultimate taboos, she looked a little bored. Or maybe lazy. And in return to such a heartless comment, if she just so happened to overhear them, she would have forced those horrible words right back down their throat.

Both figuratively *and* literally.

Because when pushed came to shove, humans were little more than flies buzzing around garbage. Annoying in large numbers but otherwise insignificant. At the slightest indication that death was not only possible, but super likely, their so-called bravery and courage crumpled like day-old clothes piled in the corner of the -

Unbearable sadness. Self-loathing. Guilt. Depression. Hatred.

The symphony of emotions slammed against her heart. Anyone else, especially if they were human, might have wallowed in misery. Or maybe curled into a ball underneath the counter and cried. But not her. Never her. Instead of feeling awful, her smile widened. Amusement shone from her eyes. And leaning forward, chin propped on her folded fingers, a soft giggle forced its way through her grinning lips.

"Finally awake, Ryuko?"

Nui Harime, or simply Nui as she preferred calling herself these days, stuck out her tongue. Her blonde hair, no longer drill-like pigtails but waves of thick curls possessing impossible volume, bounced as her head bobbed back and forth. Instead of a pink and

richly-adorned dress, something she'd personally stitched with tons of love and care, she looked like a normal naked ape. Which was super ironic. If Satsuki or Ryuko saw her, they'd totally laugh in her face. Or try killing her. Probably both. But honestly, she couldn't care less about their opinions when it came her to stylish new clothes.

A white t-shirt with the Revocs insignia embroidered in bold red letters across the front.

The cutest pink jacket, which came with a matching hood, more than enough pockets to put lots of stuff and a superfluous zipper.

Slightly baggy jeans with the cuffs rolled up, exposing her cute ankles.

Adorable white and pink sneakers.

And a silver locket in the shape of a stylized heart dangling around her neck.

"Golly..."

Blinking once, then twice, Nui puffed her cheeks, pouting in the cutest way possible, "... and here I thought you'd sleep forever!"

Did her sister have to be so gosh-darn lazy? Just because some morally unpleasant immortal almost succeeded in removing her metaphysical heart, reducing her existence to something below that of a naked ape's, wasn't any excuse for Ryuko to waste an entire month! This wasn't summer vacation, you know! There were things to do. Humans to annoy. And, if one or two pigs in human clothing pushed her *just* a little too far, to kill and bury deep in the woods outside Twilight Town. Then again, she really had no right to complain about what Ryuko decided to do with most of her valuable time.

Her sneakers hit the ground with a soft *thump* as she hopped off the stool.

Not that there wasn't a lot she could complain about - destroying the Original Life Fiber, interfering with the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet more times than she could count, making the first seventeen years of her existence meaningless, severing her arms and gouging out her eye. Granted, the last one wasn't Ryuko's fault. It had been her dear old dad decided to go out with a stupid bang. But guilt by association, particularly when Ragyo - sorry, Lady Ragyo - forbade her from doing anything fun, was totally legitimate.

Still, as much as she adored revenge, Ryuko was the reason her heart hadn't unraveled into nothingness.

Undaunted by the complexity of the task standing before her, Nui propped her hands against her waist, stared at the shelves, some of which hovered through magic, and smirked.

After Satsuki befouled and ruined Junketsu through a terrible concoction of chemicals, rendering the Kamui unable to activate Absolute Domination, Shinra Koketsu had been her *chef-d'oeuvre*. A masterpiece among masterpieces. Because with the super special dress asserting dominance over Life Fibers, Ragyo didn't need to worry about Ryuko or Satsuki or the pigs in human clothing ruining the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. Pulling another trick out of her Kamui's sleeves or growing twice as strong close to death didn't matter when anything using Life Fibers couldn't so much as scratch Shinra Koketsu!

And yet, from Ryuko's memories, that was exactly what happened.

"Hmm... hmm... hmm..."

Humming under her breath, she began the thrice-daily process of rearranging the merchandise by type, price *and* color.

For a brief, almost imperceptible, blink of an eye, her cheerful personality faltered. From the moment she became one with the Original Life Fiber to merging with Shinra Koketsu and Ragyo to fighting against Ryuko in the depths of space, she had been aware.

Conscious. Awake but not able to do anything. A strange yet worthwhile existence. At the time, her purpose was no longer necessary. The world had no more use for a Grand Couturier to make tons of cute outfits. So, to watch through Ragyo's eyes as Ryuko failed to save humanity from their destiny had been like a dream come true.

And that's when her memories became fuzzy.

When Ragyo destroyed herself rather than surrender to Ryuko and the naked apes, darkness had encroached upon her heart. But before anything happened, another oh-so-familiar heart had repelled the shadows. The brilliant crimson light radiating from its Life Fibers, which were synchronized with another Life Fiber being's powerful heart, had whispered thoughts of sanctuary. And it was there she dreamt, safe and sound. From start to finish, through thick and thin, she had watched Ryuko's adventures across the worlds like a back-seat driver, unable to do anything yet capable of whispering words of encouragement.

Leaning forward, hands clasped against the small of her back as she carefully checked several expensive items on the lower shelves, Nui smacked her lips together.

"The Realm of Light sure is an interesting place."

That was the gosh-darn truth! If Ragyo wasn't already deader than dead, she'd be speechless. Or at the very least, baffled by the irrelevancy of Life Fibers. The Original Life Fiber was supposed to have forcibly evolved humanity to better serve as nourishment. Clothing was the punishment for their primordial sin. And yet, aside from Ryuko and herself, there weren't any Life Fibers. Not a single thread. Everything revolved around light and darkness. Oh, and something esoteric and unreachable called Kingdom Hearts.

It was almost as if Ragyo had been completely and totally wrong about everything!

Pushing that particular line of thinking to the back of her mind, Nui huffed as she remembered the awful person who gave Ryuko and her friends so much trouble. Gosh, no matter how she looked at it, Ardyn Izunia might have super strong, and his darkness no laughing matter, but his motives were cliché. Single-minded revenge against his brother for stabbing him in the back? She could appreciate the sentiment. She really could. There was no reason darkness couldn't be useful, or even beneficial, in the right hands.

But something that *boring* as the source of his eternal hatred?

Nui couldn't remember the last time she felt so... disappointed.

"Ba-bum-bum-bum bum-bum bum-bum-bum!"

While she was awfully curious how such an amazing and exciting universe could exist without Life Fibers, the concept of a metaphorical heart continuously piqued her interest. Humans had studied the darn things for centuries without getting anywhere. They were both strong and weak. One could wield the light or, if they were pathetic, succumb to darkness and vanish into nothingness. Destroyed by their own hubris. A downright atrocious ending. But that wasn't surprising. After all, naked apes were nothing more than insects. But the heart was that which granted someone existence. Without the heart, the body would be nothing more than an empty, purposeless shell.

But speaking of removing someone's heart, it was a shame that clichéd villain was dead. Or worse. Or whatever happened to darkness when exposed to the brilliance of overwhelmingly powerful light. Because when he tried yanking out Ryuko's heart - right before her sister's Life Fibers pulled the darn thing back inside her body - she had felt pure agony much worse than Isshin Matoi slicing through her eye with the Scissor Blades.

What happened next was a mystery.

Light.

Darkness.

She remembered feeling everything.

Her very *existence*, in that brief yet infinitely long moment, had been never-ending pain.

And then suddenly, like changing her underwear, it had *stopped*. Aware that something had changed, she opened her eyes, both of them, and found herself flat on her back in the woods outside Twilight Town, almost good as new.

Almost, of course, being the super important word.

Whether the naked apes believed her or not, she hadn't been promoted to Grand Couturier simply on her good looks and charming personality. It had taken hard work and sweat. Simply using intuition, she could pluck the Banshi right out of Goku Uniforms. She could spot differences between dress patterns with one eye closed. Sure, the well-dressed man who held the position prior to herself hadn't been half-bad. And any pig in human clothing who garnered even a shred of Ragyo's respect deserved a friendly greeting in the morning. And yet, despite working until his fingers bled, the man's compatibility with Life Fibers had been downright atrocious.

Which was why, on her thirteenth birthday, she killed him.

Painlessly, of course.

And that was how she *knew* what Ryuko did, accidentally or otherwise.

"Hmm... hmm..."

Continuing to hum the same catchy song when a human approached the counter, Nui turned around, gear-like stitches surrounding eerily familiar sapphire eyes, and smiled, "Welcome to Elmina's Workshop! How can I help you?"

You Know Who

[img:
[
AAALAAAAAABAAEAAAIBRAA7](
AAALAAAAAABAAEAAAIBRAA7)]

Last edited: Jan 19, 2019

Chapter 10.7

*So, Kingdom Hearts III is just around the corner. In less than a week, spoilers will cover the internet. But until that time, I suppose this update will have to do. And just for the record, *this* section is what I wanted to do with 10.2. It took some time and thinking, not to mention a lot of planning, but I think I got it just right.*

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/8/83/Sc00053.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140315012143>]

"Are you ready?"

It was like someone found the most annoying thing in the universe decided to use it on *her*. How many times was Satsuki planning to ask the same question? She understood her sis was worried. But there was a sharp and well-defined limit to her patience. A point where, no matter the reason or backstory, she decided enough was enough. And that point happened to be getting asked the same question thirteen times.

"Ready, willing and able to kick ass."

Angrily adjusting the knapsack bulging with useful crap and other essential stuff over shoulder, which was a lot less complicated than socking her sister in the jaw, Ryuko let out a deep sigh, "That *finally* answer your question? Or are ya gonna ask again, captain bossy?"

A thick eyebrow quirked before its owner brushed aside the aggravating rudeness, "Do you have adequate funds?"

"What happened on Radiant Garden was a one-time thing!"

The gardens of Alexandria Castle were usually deserted. And when they weren't, dignitaries and other stuck-up pricks normally waited in the gardens until they could speak with Queen Garnet. Apparently,

for reasons she never wanted to understand, rich assholes and pricks with a stick shoved up their ass liked obnoxious scenery and bushes sculpted into vague images of other people. But thanks to the bad weather, the place was empty. Meaning she and Satsuki could talk without some bastard snooping where their nose didn't belong.

"That only happened because of the Unversed. And Vanitas."

Her sneakers hit the top of the stone stairs around the expansive marble fountain overlooking the gardens with a *thump*. And rolling her eyes, Ryuko grumbled. It wasn't that she disliked Satsuki's concern. She didn't! If their positions were reversed, more likely than not, she would probably - no, she definitely would - ask the same questions over and over. But like she said, there was a sharp, well-defined limit to her patience. Something her sis knew yet purposely chose to ignore. Which only made things *worse*. And yet, after what felt like an eternity but was only a few seconds, she buried her irritation. She pushed it to the deepest corner of her heart.

And huffed at Satsuki unconvinced expression.

Another shrug caused the knapsack to bounce against her shoulder, "But those things are pretty much pushovers."

"Overconfidence only leads to failure. I thought such a lesson would have already engraved itself upon your heart, Ryuko."

It wasn't readily apparent. Anyone unfamiliar with their situation would believe she was worried. Or concerned. And while those notions were somewhat accurate, they weren't why her tone hardened. Brushing a strand hair behind her ear, Satsuki allowed her thoughts to be drawn inwards. Her eyebrows furrowed as a remnant of her former occupation - student council president of Honnouji Academy - made itself known with utmost determination.

"You and I, we both believed, at one time or another, power or intelligence rendered us all but invincible."

Clack!

Her heeled boots slapped against the cobblestone path with a heavy *snap-clack*.

"That simply because we were stronger, smarter or possessed resources and allies, any potential threats, whether new or old, wouldn't stand a chance."

The rhythmic *snap-clack* continued for some time. Long enough for her words to engrave themselves upon Ryuko's heart. It was a tense silence. One punctuated by her heartbeat. And yet, upon reaching the fields stretching behind the castle gardens to the misty mountains curving on the horizon, she turned aside, "The Keyblade is formidable. But at one time, so were Senketsu and Junketsu. They were strong. Working alongside them, *we* were powerful. And yet, for all their strength, they were *nothing* against the monster that was our mother."

"Oh..."

Clack!

As if detecting Ryuko's sudden awareness of the truth behind her words, Satsuki paused, a soft gentleness entering her voice, "All I ask is that you do not overestimate yourself. Nothing more."

Ryuko felt more conscious of their surroundings than any time in the last couple of hours. Her mouth opened and closed. She bit the inside of her cheek, tongue pressed against the roof of her mouth. Overconfident? Her? Sure, maybe she tended to get into the groove. But she couldn't remember the last time she fought someone she didn't go all-out trying to defeat. Not that asshole punk on Radiant Garden. Not Jecht. And certain not Ardyn or Xehanort. So why was Satsuki acting like the Keyblade suddenly made her cocky and arrogant?

Clack!

"Now then, returning to the matter at hand," pivoting to their earlier conversation without missing a beat, Satsuki ignored the expressions playing across Ryuko's face, "I assume you've remembered our agreement?"

"Yeah, yeah..."

And there it was. One of her sis's most irritating qualities. In the blink of an eye, Satsuki could go from saying something deep and meaningful, comments that made a person truly think about their place in the world, to business. It was annoying as hell. But that didn't mean her sis didn't care. On the contrary, no matter how many times she changed to subject, Satsuki's heart was like an open book.

"Make sure to come back once a week."

Half the people in Alexandria would believe anything Satsuki claimed as the truth. And the other half would go along for the ride. As for her? No matter how much Satsuki tried keeping stuff personal, nothing in the universe could mess with the connection between their hearts, "If I find anyone, go straight to Yen Sid. Don't be a hero. Blah. Blah. Blah."

Thump!

The heavy knapsack hit the ground with a resounding *thud*, "Do you want that in writing? Or is my word good enough for the great Satsuki Kiryuin?"

"Do you *want* to write it down?"

Ryuko's frown twisted into a scowl, "Well, no, I -"

"Then I don't foresee any problems," Satsuki contemplated allowing Ryuko to finish speak. She was anything, if not polite. To allow one enough grace to finish gathering their thoughts was the epitome of civilization. And yet, for some strange reason, perhaps because of the turbulent emotions roiling within her heart or maybe the

deepening connection between Ryuko and herself, she hadn't considered such a thing. Or rather, as the corners of her lips quirked into a smirk, she considered and promptly discarded the solution as worse than inadequate.

"Unless, of course, there's a reason I shouldn't trust you."

Shink!

Without wasting time wondering about ifs, ands or buts, Ryuko clasped her fingers around nothingness as Threadcutter manifested from the innermost depths of her heart. The Keyblade sat heavily in her grasp. Its keychain jingled against her wrist. The sides of her mouth pinched inwards. And as the final traces of twinkling crimson faded into the afternoon, she swept her arm outwards. For a moment, just long enough that anyone snooping where they didn't belong might believe she snapped, Threadcutter was aimed right between Satsuki's eyes.

"Taking me at my word, huh?"

When her sis's expression didn't so much as twitch, not a goddamn inch, she sarcastically grinned, "You must be getting soft in your old age."

"Coming from you, Ryuko, I'll take that as a compliment."

Ryuko rolled her eyes. It was obvious. Well, not that obvious. But Satsuki's somehow still condescending chuckle said more than enough. Taking a deep breath, she playfully shoved a hand against Satsuki's shoulder. Alright, it was time to get serious. Planting her sneakers firmly upon the ground, straightening her shoulders and clearing her mind, Ryuko allowed her heart to give her body. Threadcutter spun around and between her fingers. The Keyblade sung with brilliant light. Circular rings of crimson and gold adorned with magical symbols and other patterns manifested around her Keyblade.

And with a clockwise twist of her wrists, a beam of light shot forth into the sky, temporarily unlocking the gateway into the Lanes Between.

Standing on the sidelines, Satsuki could only watch as Ryuko slammed one hand against the gauntlet on her left arm. She folded both hands into the pockets of her overcoat as the once damaged armor, scattered and cracked through intense combat, manifested. With her hair swaying across the contours of her face when Threadcutter transformed into a vehicle capable of inter-world travel, the only physical means of doing so, she waited patiently for the opportune moment. Thick yet tapering eyebrows furrowed when Ryuko impatiently straddled the glider.

But it was only when Ryuko prepared to leave that she calmly inquired, "When do you intend on apologizing to Mickey?"

"... shit!"

The question punched her straight in the gut. It knocked the wind from her sails. She slouched against Threadcutter. Her helmet slammed against the transformed Keyblade. But just as quickly, Ryuko recomposed herself, "Ugh, you're right."

There wasn't any point crying. Not when she forgot something important. Smashing her boot against the ground while pulled against Threadcutter's handles, she forced the Keyblade to spin around, sending waves of energy and light blasting across the grassy field, "Guess that settles it! First stop - Disney Town!"

Satsuki didn't speak another word as Ryuko soared higher and higher into the skies. She had nothing *to* say. Neither compliments or insults. After all, this wasn't goodbye. This was but a temporary separation. Her sister would return in a week. Possibly sooner. They would speak, laugh and possibly - nay, likely - argue over the pettiest of problems. And so, her recently regrown hair swaying in the wind accompanying Ryuko's departure, she watched her sister vanish into

the vast ocean of darkness between words. Her expression furrowed.

And only when she could no longer detect the warmth of her sister's light... as the final flickers of sapphire vanished... did she allow herself to turn around.

The winds of fate truly are mercurial.

"Sorry I'm late."

Auron could almost feel his old friend's presence as he stood before the marble plaque and rusted Keyblade, "You're probably upset. Can't say that I blame you."

Wind swept through the field, carrying the far-off yet familiar scent of sea water. The recently regrown grass, undoubtedly Lulu's doing, swayed around his boots. The collar of his haori rippled. At some point since Merlin helped him get home, a wreath had been hung over Braska's Keyblade. And stuck in the assortment of flowers and twigs, pinned to the middle by a white ribbon, was a childish drawing. One whose very presence pulled at his heartstrings.

"It just... took some time finding my way back."

A gravelly chuckle passed between the former guardian's pursed lips as he unlatched the jug on his right hip, "I met a man. He was rude, arrogant and full of himself. But he had a good heart. And when push came to shove, he tended to do the right thing regardless of the consequences."

Slowly raising the jug to his lips, Auron allowed some of the sweet liquid to trickle down his throat before pouring the rest onto Braska's grave, "I'm sure you would have gotten along."

He laughed again. Only this time, at the thought of Jecht and Braska meeting. Perhaps drowning his sorrows was the solution. Because

thinking about those two men somehow meeting sent shivers racing down his spine.

"Jecht has a kid. A son a few years younger than Yuna. I was thinking about introducing them."

Lowering the jug of sake until his arm hung limp at his side, Auron almost chuckled. Braska had never been a firm believer in some of the more orthodox Keyblade precepts. He viewed the worlds outside of light and darkness, black and white, good and evil. If something didn't work, the man used to argue, why not change? At the time, he thought his friend was being ridiculous. There was a reason most worlds were kept ignorant of the greater universe. And every time, Braska would counter with the ring on his finger.

"Who knows, maybe they'll become friends."

I've made mistakes. Far too many to possibly count.

A young boy, almost four years old with sandy hair, covered in cuts, bruises and sunburns, tossed the strange ball into the air, raised his foot and immediately proceeded to miss.

"Give me a break..."

Jecht couldn't believe his terrible luck. It was just like he told Auron. Without him around to teach Tidus the ropes, his son was nothing but a crybaby. And if that wasn't bad enough for his well-earned and deserved reputation, the kid completely whiffed one of the easiest techniques in blitzball. A simple, straightforward kick. How could the son of the Great Jecht have zero hand-eye coordination? It didn't make sense. Was there some screwed-up god looking for revenge because he bested their supposed 'champion' or something?

"Aw, geez..."

When his son started sniffing, the first stage before tears and snot and other nonsense he had no experience dealing with, Jecht

rubbed the corded muscles of his neck. Damn, did Tidus's eyes have to be that large? Looking at those puppy-dog eyes made him feel awful. He'd rather go all-out against Ryuko and Auron than deal with *this*. But with a grumble, he folded his arms, each and every well-sculpted muscle on display, leaned backwards and stared at the sun. Maybe he was being a little too harsh on the brat. Nobody said raising a kid was easy or nothing.

If Kaiyo could deal with dirty diapers, vomit and other disgusting messes for three years, teaching Tidus how to play blitzball, the sport of Destiny Islands, should be a piece of cake.

"Look... uh... you gotta keep your eyes on the ball."

Alright, that settled it. His mind was made up. No more whining or crying. Dragging his foot against the blitzball next to Tidus, he kicked it into his hand, where it proceeded to rapidly spin around his index finger, "Watch and learn!"

With confidence born from years of practice and training, he latched his fingers around the ball, pivoted on his back heel and tossed it straight into the air. Waiting a moment, eyes never looking away, he watched the ball arc through the sky, briefly blotting out the sun, before taking once step backwards and bouncing it against his forehead. Then his right knee. Followed by his left knee, front of his right foot and chest. Left shoulder. Right shoulder. The nape of his neck. And finally, catching the blitzball on his left foot, sending it straight into his son's bewildered arms.

"Now..."

Grinning when Tidus's shock at watching something so damn amazing turned into familiar determination, Jecht folded his arms and playfully scoffed, "... think you can handle something that easy?"

Encumbered by pride, I believed forgiveness impossible.

"Enkidu's gonna love this one..."

Gilgamesh felt like someone tossed him head-first into a flock of wild red chocobos. And *then* gave the blasted birds Gysahl Greens. His arms and legs hurt. His back itched. A couple of ribs were probably broken. And he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. But those dragon knights didn't know the meaning of holding back. Sure, most of them hadn't been too much trouble. They were insanely fast but lacked strength to puncture his Genji Armor. But that one guy and his girl that was a friend but totally not his girlfriend? Simply thinking about the dead look in his eyes sent shivers racing down his spine.

"Humph! Last time I bother visiting Burmecia!"

As he relentlessly trudged through the vast emptiness filled with monsters, both physical and psychological, that was the Realm of Darkness, the greatest swordsman who ever walked the realms grumbled at the cracks in his Genji Armor. He muttered under his breath at the burns and dents in the ancient armor. But he most certainly did not whine nor moan. This was terrific. One misstep on his grand escape and the Burmecian in the fancy red coat formed a magical dragon's head that burst out of the ground.

But now he needed to visit Daguerreo.

And because of one small mistake, not even his own fault, those persnickety moogles always jacked up their prices threefold.

"Hmm?"

How very odd. For a moment, he could have sworn someone else was lurking in the shadows. A faint yet familiar light far in the distance. Hefting both Galatyn and Lightbringer along with Dragon Whisker and Tournesol, Gilgamesh pivoted on his back foot, stomping against the ground for emphasis. But when nothing jumped out of the shadows, not even one or two of those annoying Heartless, he visibly sagged.

"Probably just my imagination."

But such foolishness couldn't have been further from the truth.

Rain trickled down the creases and folds of her red coat. It dripped from her winged hat and fingers, falling into rivers that snaked down the roof towards the packed streets hundreds of feet below. The bitter chill clung to her heart. Her alabaster hair laid matted against her snout. Standing atop the steeple of a building, tri-pronged javelin resting upon her shoulder and jade eyes narrowed, Freya stared upwards into the storm. The orange ribbon tied to her tail fluttered in the wind.

And when movement in the distance caught her attention, she vanished in a flicker of speed, disappearing between bursts of lightning.

The mark you've made on the Realm of Light has been undeniable.

"Move it or lose it!"

Philoctetes, or simply Phil to anyone who didn't want to end up tossed down Charybdis' mouth full of razor-sharp teeth, clapped the back of one hand against the other. His new outlook on training took some getting used to. It was odd, to say the least. He wasn't someone who usually went back on their word. And he *never* broke a promise, especially when those Furies swarmed anyone who so much as refused to pay the ticket for their double-parked chariot. But with all the recent chaos, maybe it was time to throw his playbook into the Aegean Sea.

"C'mon! What are you guys? Rookies?"

Besides, now that he thought about it, the student-teacher ratio deserved an upgrade from the bronze age.

"It's only been ten laps!"

Herc might have gotten out of his rut thanks to Ventus, and that other kid wasn't half-bad considering he didn't have a drop of godliness in his veins, but they still lacked something that made heroes... well... heroes. It wasn't brawn. Nope, there were more than enough mortals, half-gods and monsters capable of lifting marble statues over their heads. And they both had compassion and heart. No, it was something else. Experience. It was one thing to train one's butt off. But if you never fought against someone willing and, if he was being honest, quite able to send you on a one-way ticket to the Underworld, then boy, you were in for a world of hurt.

"Five more laps and you're halfway done!"

It was too bad Jecht vanished off the face of the world. Now, there was a real champ. The guy had everything. Style. Pizazz. Strength. He knew how to work the crowd *and* keep them coming back for more. Was he worthy of being immortalized as a true hero with legions of screaming fans and oodles of merchandising rights?

Eh, not so much.

But he could have given Herc and Zack a few lessons in *real* fighting.

On the other hand, that girl with the cocky attitude hadn't been half-bad. What was her name again? It was on the tip of his tongue. A strange name. Ventus and Aqua claimed knowing her. Oh, right. Ryuko. He'd been in the crowd the day she challenged Jecht. A wannabe fighter with no name recognition, strange clothing, weird hair and a vulgar mouth antagonizing the champ? It was must-watch entertainment. He'd expected the champ to make short work of her. Just like the other poor schmucks getting out in front of their chariots.

But then Ryuko began throwing punches way above her weight bracket.

And that's when everything started getting interesting.

"Hah... hah..."

There were blisters on his hands. There were blisters on his blisters. Everything hurt. He wanted to keel over and die. But clenching his teeth and adjusting his grip on the ropes tied to his shoulders and chest, Zack kept moving, slowly dragging the half-ton boulder across the ground, "Ready to... give up... yet?"

At his side, moving just as slowly, Hercules readjusted his grip on the twenty-foot chunk of marble, "Right... after... you..."

"Less talking! More walking!"

Shouting into the rolled-up piece of parchment, Phil hurried after the two heroes-in-training, "Another word from either of ya and I'm adding fifty more laps!"

And those who your actions have irrevocably changed.

Underneath the blazing sun, water lapping at their feet, Sora and Riku laughed as they pretend-fought with discarded branches.

Despite the very weight of the world on your shoulders, you refuse to succumb to despair.

In the windswept graveyard encompassing the ancient battlefield between Keyblade wielders, a conflict which sundered the original world into countless shards, an armored silhouette crouched against the ground. With their cape fluttering around their pockmarked and charred armor, chunks carved out in chaotic arcs, they knelt unmoving, fingers clasping the handle of a massive Keyblade.

Your heart remains implacably strong, reducing the past to nothing more than memory.

Playfully swinging her legs back and forth, Nui watched the never-ending sunset from her favorite perch on Twilight Town's clocktower. In one hand, moisture dripped from the melting ice cream. And in the

other, connected to one manicured finger and curling around the rest, was a single crimson thread.

It was thanks to that same light that the darkness clouding my heart cleared.

Satsuki stood before Beatrix.

Sitting in her private study, book in hand and armor replaced with something more comfortable, the handicapped Keyblade Master quirked an eyebrow.

And when the normally proud young woman genuflected at the waist, hair billowing around her face and tension absent from her heart, the faintest of smiles tugged upon Beatrix's lips as she gently closed the book between her fingers.

And thus, no longer encumbered by guilt, I shall march forward into the future.

Sapphire light blasted from Threadcutter as Ryuko soared through the keyhole-shaped gateway into the world.

Until such time I can stand at your side...

She raced across the twisting and turning path, skipped several floating stone steps at a time. Her heart beat a mile a minute. Adrenaline flushed through her veins. Her mouth was really dry. Her arms and legs tingled. But no matter how weird her body felt, she pressed onwards without stopping. She moved faster. Never slowing down. A smile stretched across her face when Yen Sid appeared in a flash of brilliant magic. With bated breath, gasping as she took the final step onto the sorcerer's front lawn, Ryuko watched him nod and step aside.

Allowing someone to leap through the space previously occupied by his body.

... and properly thank you for all you've done...

Acting purely on well-honed instincts, Ryuko grabbed the approaching missile, spun it around several times and promptly placed it feet-first on the ground.

... Ryuko.

"I've missed you so much, Ryuko!"

Whatever else Mako Mankanshoku wanted to say devolved into unintelligible blubbing.

"Hey, c'mon. It's alright."

As Mako latched her arms around her chest and squeezed, Ryuko allowed her armor to disappear into motes of ruby light. This ranked among her best days ever. And anyone claiming otherwise would find out how much getting her fist shoved through their face could hurt. But before she could savor the moment, Mako began rubbing against her chest. She grimaced at the spittle and snot mixing into a disgusting mess connecting her jacket to Mako's stuffed nose. Yet the tears of joy bubbling around her best friend's quivering eyes, which were mere seconds from turning into gushing fountains, instantly drained the anger from her heart.

"I never stopped looking for you, Mako!"

There was another snuffle.

A hiccup.

And with an obnoxiously loud *snort*, sucking the snot back up her nose, Mako blinked, "R-Really?"

"Yeah, I've been to more worlds than you could - "

Ryuko barely managed getting out half her answer before Mako once again decided to use her as a teddy bear. Only this time, she

decided to let it slide. What was the point of fighting against fate? Freeing one of her arms from Mako's 'ultimate friendship hug,' which had proved many times in the past to be downright inescapable, she looked over her friend's shoulder at the sorcerer with a shit-eating grin, "How did you find her?"

"It was Merlin who found Mako Mankanshoku."

Yen Sid stroked his beard. There was much he didn't know. Information his former master didn't so much fail to mention, but simply forgot in the interest of reuniting Ryuko with Mako Mankanshoku. Yet, even if it was presumptuous, he swept his arm towards a particular star in the glowing heavens surrounding his world, "Apparently, she was making quite the living on an interesting world called... San Fransokyo."

"Huh?"

Ryuko blinked. San Fransokyo sounded stupid. Like someone took San Francisco and Tokyo and blended their names together, "Never heard of the place."

"It's super amazing, Ryuko! Like someone put Tokyo and San Francisco into a gigantic blender along with a bunch of robots and other advanced stuff!"

Just as she finished explaining the awesomeness of her new home, which wasn't nearly as amazing without Ryuko or her family or anyone else, Mako gasped. In a lurch, she leapt onto her feet, hands smacking her cheeks, "Oh my gosh! I totally forgot thanks to that super-nice old man with the beard and slippers, but my shift at the Lucky Cat Café started almost two hours ago! Aunt Cass is gonna kill me!"

Entirely unsurprised when Mako started panicking about smoothies and macarons, right before leaping into Yen Sid's arms and demanding he teleport her back to San Fransokyo on the double, Ryuko smirked. She laughed. And collapsing onto the ground as the

infamous sorcerer, one of the most powerful guys she knew, found himself utterly unprepared for the bundle of energy that was Mako Mankanshoku, she closed her eyes and grinned.

RYUKO MATOI: AGE 19

KEYBLADE MASTER

Last edited: Jan 22, 2019

Revised Sections Alert

[img:

https://66.media.tumblr.com/8a902bdec54f4101717b11a64d78aec5/tumblr_onulteffT91ucpcboo1_540.gif]

Alright, as most of you are probably already aware, last week I discovered quite the spoiler. Completely by accident, of course. But regardless of the circumstance, what I learned forced me to go back and change quite a bit. Usually, I wouldn't have bothered doing so. As a rule, I treat crossovers as something that requires changing the present (i.e. the actual story) and the events leading up to the present (i.e. the past). It's something I used extensively in my previous story. However, in the case of this particular piece of information? This, in the simplest terms, revelation? Well, I couldn't ignore it. And I think moving forward without addressing the matter would only make things worse. And so, I spent the last week or so revising the hell out of eight different sections.

Everything revise has been linked below. And for the sake of fairness to those still playing Kingdom Hearts III, I **won't** say what I changed. I also, and this isn't spoiling anything, **completely rewrote** Unknown Report 1 from scratch. Having Vanitas speak in first person compared to the third person used in the rest of the story, including the other Unknown Reports, was quite jarring. Since I was already doing some revising before starting chapter 11, I thought, what the hell, I might as well fix this while I'm here.

And as I've already mentioned, I've kept the original version of the sections. They are inside spoiler boxes at the bottom of each post.

(1) [Unknown Report 1](#)

(2) [Chapter 4.1](#)

- (3) [Chapter 6.3](#)
- (4) [Chapter 7.1](#)
- (5) [Chapter 7.3](#)
- (6) [Chapter 7.4](#)
- (7) [Unknown Report 7](#)
- (8) [Chapter 9.5](#)
- (9) [Chapter 10.4](#)

Chapter 11.1 [NEW]

*As previously mentioned, a lot of good criticism was brought up considering this chapter. Before I could proceed forward, revisions needed to be made. To start off the process, here's the rewritten opening section of Chapter 11. It isn't quite a faithful scene-for-scene revision. You might recognize bits and pieces, but there have been substantial changes plus an entirely new opening scene. A lot of Ryuko's fight against the Darkside's army was changed. Her thoughts on Maleficent were also adjusted to better fit with Maleficent's scene. Also, the hilarious typo involving Gamagori's size compared to Mako was corrected. If you wish to find the old Chapter 11.1, it can be found in the **Sidestory** Index.*

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/5/5e/Ryuko_pissed_at_Nui.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20150420183631]

BOOM!!!

Rippling explosions lacerated the peaceful tranquility.

BOOM!!! BOOM!!!!

The forest erupted into chaos as centuries-old tress shattered into thick splinters. Concussive shockwaves shredded leaves from branches. Chocobos and other animals fled towards the nearest haven. The ground itself was torn asunder as manifested light and darkness twisted and contorted into superheated flames. Black smoke plumed upwards with every subsequent eruption, blotting out the perpetual sunset hanging over Twilight Town.

Several square miles of once-pristine and untouched landscape turned into death and fire as explosions, one after another, snaked back and forth, crisscrossed each other until nothing remained but

echoes beating against the world's very heart. Tendrils of crimson, shadowed and brightened, clashed.

Until, with one final confrontation, felt all the way from the center of Twilight Town, they were repulsed in opposite directions.

KA-BOOM!!!

Their vision was tainted by alternating shades of orange and yellow as they barreled through tree after tree. Bent nearly in half, the forest transformed into a rapidly-shifted blur mixed with rushing winds. Aware of everything yet briefly unable to do anything to change their fate, they slammed into a boulder... and then shattered it... before, with a lurch, they promptly pivoted midair. Blood spewed from their mouth. More than should have been possible gushed from glowing wounds, some passing clear through their body. But with a hate-filled snarl and curse, they righted themselves, glowing crimson light trailing from their feathery hair.

"RAGHHHH!!!"

Her bare heels dug through the packed soil, kicking up clouds of dirt and rocks as she skidded across the desolate landscape. Forcing the ruby and gold Keyblade into the ground, its coloration twisted by the surrounding inferno, it took time. Blood dripped from her fingers and chin. Her jacket was torn to shreds. Every piece of clothing below her knees was blasted into oblivion. She felt like complete and utter shit.

But eventually her momentum halted.

And standing amidst the crackling fire and flames, lips pulled into a twisted, bloodied snarl, Ryuko glared through the conflagration. Her eyes - no, her heart - focused upon the figure recovering just as quickly as herself.

"FUCK!!!"

The heated air burned her lungs, but only enough to parch her throat. Gasping for breath as exhaustion, as alien to her existence as normal was to Mako, she stepped forward, bloodied feet crunching against crisp leaves. Threadcutter remained clenched between the white-knuckled fingers of her right hand, keychain jingling alongside the inferno's raging winds. Light shimmered against its mystical surface. And in her left, trembling with every staggered rise and fall of her shoulders, was one half of the Scissor Blades.

"TCH!!!"

Her feet carried her backwards when a silhouette appeared in the flames. Someone identical in posture and stature. A monster holding a Keyblade bearing more than an uncanny and unnatural resemblance to Threadcutter in their right hand. While in their left, having stolen it halfway through the battle in an exchange that left a massive gash in her stomach, lay the other half of the Scissor Blades.

Ignoring the taste of blood lingering upon her tongue, an all-too-familiar thick and coppery syrup, Ryuko seethed when the figure vanished into the conflagration.

"EAT THIS YOU FUCKING BITCH!!!"

The Scissor Blade was cast to the wayside as she gripped Threadcutter with both hands. Hefting the Keyblade against her waist, bloodied dual-colored hair whipped across her vision as she tracked the bitch's movements as easily as it was to breathe. In a flash of light bright enough to overpower the surrounding conflagration and increasing darkness, her Keyblade transformed into a massive railgun nearly twice the length of her body. Alongside clanking metal and metallic noises, Threadcutter shifted and morphed. Her stance widened. And with the razor-sharp edges of her Keyblade rotating around the end of the barrel independent of conscious thought, she squeezed a mental trigger.

A harsh whine filled the air, growing louder and deeper until it overwhelmed everything else.

Doubling her grip on Threadcutter as a crimson and gold sigil bearing resemblance to Senketsu manifested in front of Threadcutter's barrel, Ryuko snarled. She dug her bare toes into the ground. Her arms and legs tightened, muscles locking into position.

"KISARAGI NOVA!!!"

With those fateful words, a beam of unholy light exploded from her transformed Keyblade.

Everything became crimson.

And then everything between Threadcutter and some random point half a mile behind the bitch disintegrated.

The sound was deafening. The bright light made her wince. The kickback forced her heels backwards through the dirt, leaving twin divots. But for several agonizingly long seconds, an eternity, crimson energy blasted through the forest surrounding Twilight Town. A beam of concentrated light powerful enough that Xehanort would have been blasted into godforsaken oblivion. It should have been enough to kill the bitch. This much power was way beyond anything she and Senketsu had been capable of achieving.

Yet when she could no longer continue firing... when the beam flickered and dissipated, Threadcutter transforming back to normal... ice colder than death itself enveloped her heart.

Everything had been reduced to a wasteland. A scar of burning death stretching into the horizon. Only standing in the middle of the destruction looking like death warmed over, yet still fucking alive, was the psychotic bitch. An enormous and intricate purple and pink shield had taken the brunt of her Kisaragi Nova.

And suddenly, as if a switch flipped in her heart, Ryuko saw nothing but red.

"GODDAMN IT!!!"

In one step, she yanked the Scissor Blade out of the ground.

Another step halfway reduced the distance between herself and the bitch.

"JUST! FUCKING! DIE!!!"

Screaming at the top of her lungs, Ryuko thrust Threadcutter towards the bitch's heart, crimson light spilling across existence in a cacophony of power and hatred.

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 11 - Total Eclipse of the Heart

An obnoxious *boing* mocked her heart as Threadcutter ricocheted off the overweight Heartless's protruding stomach.

["Tch!"](#)

Ryuko hated the Heartless.

The bastard blocking her Keyblade hadn't been expected. But it wasn't new. And it wasn't goddamn interesting. And instead of wasting time thinking about another approach, she swung again. Faster than it took the Heartless's stomach to stop quivering like a bowl of jelly, she ground her sneaker against the pavement, Threadcutter arcing close to her body, and smashed the Keyblade into the same fucking spot. Only harder. A lot harder. Like a hot knife through butter, vermilion light followed behind her Keyblade as not only did it bisect the surprised Heartless, every monster ten to twenty feet *behind* the bastard promptly disintegrated.

Because she *really* hated the Heartless.

At times like these, when she had the opportunity to cut loose, she tended to stop thinking. Her imagination ran wild. The light radiating from the depths of her heart emerged as a deep crimson aura. A glow clinging to her skin like another set of perfectly-fitting clothes. One that protected her from darkness. And other benefits. Because to the naked eye, she resembled a whirlwind of death and destruction. Each swing of Threadcutter and accompanying explosion of light and magic decimated their ranks. With effortlessness befitting a Keyblade Master of her stature, she waltzed through their ranks.

And thanks to nearly every Heartless in Traverse Town deciding to ambush her at the same time, the translucent barrier enveloping the courtyard minimized collateral damage.

Which meant she could *really* cut loose.

Crack-Snap!

Multiple bolts of blue-white lightning slammed against her back. The intense magic arced across her clothes and skin. But despite leaving the air smelling like burnt rubber and decaying ozone, all the high-level magic, which indirectly took out several Heartless as collateral damage, accomplished was draw her undivided attention.

Shink!

As her Life Fibers devoured the lingering traces of magic, she pivoted midair. Furiously dragging one sneaker against currents of vermilion light, Ryuko twisted her upper body. Muscles tensed underneath her clothes. Streaks of vibrant crimson matching the shimmering radiance of her feathery, dual-colored hair followed Threadcutter's tightening arc. And with a twist of her wrist, white-knuckled fingers holding on until the very last second, she sent the Keyblade soaring towards the Heartless dancing and prancing like nobody's business. A glowing projectile that sliced through countless Heartless on the way.

"Shit!"

Curling her fingers into claws, she glared at the platoon of mindless Heartless clambering over each other, beady yellow eyes seeking something underneath her jacket. And without the slightest hesitation, unstable magic gathered into a point-point of reddish-orange light above her palm. Magic strange enough to leave second degree burns. She clenched that dangerous power, shafts of autumnal light peeking between white-knuckled and trembling digits. She cocked her arm backwards, taking exceptional aim. And after waiting until the flying bastards were too close to dodge, she screamed and *punched* existence itself.

"FLARE PUNCH!!!"

A wave of intense, white-hot flames exploded from her trembling fist. Erupting from a single point above her burning knuckles, flesh peeling away as quickly as her Life Fibers restitched the damage, magic powerful enough that countless Heartless disintegrated into ash before their stolen hearts realized what happened blasted everything into oblivion.

But it wasn't enough.

Not by a long shot.

Ignoring the imp-like Heartless casting spell after spell without realizing they were accomplishing shit, Ryuko snapped her right arm sideways, curled her index finger and *pulled*.

Jingle!

Across the courtyard, beyond a fountain and next to a statue depicting a strange octopus with seven tentacles, embedded into the ground nearly to the handle, Threadcutter spontaneously trembled. It quivered and shook. And before the Heartless flooding the streets from every conceivable shadow or puddle of darkness, refilling the numbers destroyed by her Flare Punch in a matter of seconds, knew

what happened, the Life Fiber looped around Threadcutter pulled taut.

Slicing and dicing anything unfortunate enough to stand, or float, in its way.

"Oh, come on already!"

As the crimson thread unraveled from Threadcutter, Ryuko's frustration reach previously untold levels. This was bullshit! Every time she destroyed a Heartless, several more joined the goddamn party! Growling in the back of her throat, a sound that grew progressively guttural, she flicked her wrist, flipping Threadcutter into a reverse grip. A platform of light danced beneath her sneakers as she spun rapidly, upper body and arms rotating slightly faster than her legs. Energy rippled along the contours and edges of her Keyblade as it disappeared into blurs of vermilion and amber.

Destroying dozens upon dozens of Heartless in a barrage of strikes and slashes too fast for the naked eye to follow.

"Great..."

Which only left hundreds of shadowy monsters.

"... just great..."

Countless pairs of glowing yellow eyes filled the courtyard. Every nook and cranny were covered with Heartless. And they were *all* seeking her heart. The mindless creatures wanted it more than anything. No matter what they had to do, they wouldn't stop. They would crawl, sprint, fly and stalk through the darkness between worlds. It was one of the disadvantages of the Keyblade.

But that wasn't the reason her annoyance skipped several levels and went straight to *goddamn pissed*.

"That's enough out of you!"

Crimson wisps and motes of gold light confessed the barest hints of her strategy.

Threadcutter shone from the light radiating from her heart as it twisted through the air. Not at the enormous Heartless towering over the surrounding buildings, whose presence lengthened the surrounding shadows and devoured what little warmth existed. Instead of going after the leader of this so-called ambush, she purposely and deliberately targeted the massive sphere floating above the Darkside's raised arms. For the last several minutes, while slicing her way through the replenishing horde, she'd stalled dealing with the bastard. But no more. Not for another second. It was time to wrap things up.

She was sick and tired of the cheating asshole summoning more of his goddamn friends!

Flipping backwards over an ambitious Heartless, one leg curling through the air followed by the other, she vanished simultaneously with Threadcutter smashing into the sphere glowing darkness. An enormous *boom* echoed across Traverse Town. Light and darkness clashed within a violent explosion. Existence itself, tethered towards the light by the faintest association of the world with the greater universe, trembled under the cataclysmic confrontation.

And when the Darkside lowered its massive arm, already moving onto something equally nefarious, her sneakers *slammed* into its chest.

"STAY DOWN!!!"

It felt like kicking wet clay. Or maybe rubber. Heartless didn't have bodies. They were nothing more than darkness and hearts. But as her feet sunk into the flesh above the heart-shaped cavity, Ryuko felt something give. Raw physical strength augmented overwhelmed the Heartless's defenses. An eruption of vermilion light exploded around the congealed darkness.

WHAM!!!

With a resounding *boom* that shook the streets themselves, the gigantic Heartless crashed to the ground.

"YOU'RE NOT GOING ANYWHERE!!!"

Even as she said those words, Ryuko's mind was elsewhere. In a flash of twinkling crimson Threadcutter reappeared in her outstretched fingers. This was it. This was her chance. With the giant asshole pinned underfoot, she could finally take an accurate count of how many asses needed kicking.

"NOW... TAKE THIS!!!"

In a flash of crimson stars, Threadcutter reappeared in her outstretched fingers. This was it. This was her chance. With the giant bastard pinned to the fricking ground,

Her ponytail, ruby and black woven together into a shoulder-length tapestry, swayed as light poured from the deepest depths of her heart. A symphony of mature power and overwhelming radiance, enough to make Satsuki proud, accompanied Threadcutter snapping into position. Her wrist locked, fingers clenched against the Keyblade's handle. And as that light coalesced into a crackling orb in front of Threadcutter, wisps of magical light spiraling in concentric and ever-changing orbits, she twisted her wrist and *fired*.

"SHINKU SENJIN!!!"

In the blink of an eye, more than half of the horde simultaneously disintegrated. And over the next few seconds, Keyblade shaking from the immense strain, countless laser-like arrows destroyed the rest. Not a single Heartless, normal or those with the weird tattoo, escaped. None of them would get the opportunity to devour someone's heart. Even if that meant having Shinku Senjin's crimson projectiles curve midair, spiraling one over another to skewer Heartless lurking in the shadows.

Right before punching through the Heartless behind them.

And the Heartless behind *them*.

"Tch!"

Her tongue dragged against the back of her teeth as smoke tinted by shades of ruby and crimson wafted from Threadcutter. She couldn't sense any Heartless. They were all gone. Shinku Senjin did the trick. Which should have been a huge relief. But as she callously stepped forward, clearing the large drop to the ground with one hand stabbed in her pocket and Keyblade propped on her shoulder, she couldn't help but think something was wrong.

"Feels like I'm forgettin' something..."

A puff of air whistled through her lips as countless hearts, easily numbering in the hundreds floated upwards into the sky.

Craning her head backwards, she found the twinkling stars filling the never-ending Traverse Town nights beautiful. Not in a romantic sort of fashion. But in the same way she and Mako hung around Lindblum's Theater District. No matter how much time passed, staring at the stars lightened the load on her heart. And yet, one by one, they were blinking out. The Heartless were growing stronger. No matter how many she killed, more filled their ranks. They were a never-ending horde. One that would eventually consume everything in the Realm of Light.

Thump!

Peculiar gear-shaped pupils bearing more than a passing resemblance to stitches narrowed when the ground trembled.

The moon hanging lazily over the world peaked through the heart-shaped hole in the Heartless's chest. Glowing yellow eyes surrounded by tendrils of darkness lacked the slightest hint of emotion as their owner sought the powerful heart standing so

tantalizingly close. One massive hand swept across the ground, scattering concrete and stone in its wake. Claws dripping with darkness reached towards Ryuko. Pools of writhing shadows manifested around its misshapen feet, gateways for Heartless to once more fill the courtyard.

"That's right..."

As the monstrous claws squeezed into a fist, she vanished in a flash of light.

A moment later, strutting in the opposite direction behind the enormous Heartless with Threadcutter held outwards, crimson and gold light twinkling along the length of its blade, Ryuko snorted out the side of her mouth.

"... gotta finish you off."

The once impressive Heartless didn't answer. Not that she expected something born of the darkness within hearts to speak. It was nothing more than a rabid animal. An exceedingly and nightmarishly dangerous rabid animal. But despite Threadcutter disappearing in an explosion of crimson stars, the Darkside didn't turn around. It didn't move. It didn't acknowledge she was leaving. Then, appearing one after another, lines crisscrossed its petrified form. Jagged cracks expanded outwards, glowing with increasingly bright vermilion light.

And by the time she vaulted onto the nearest roof using nothing but her natural - err, unnatural - strength, the Heartless violently exploded into tiny shards of burning darkness.

"Ugh..."

She paid minimum attention, that is to say none, to the whispers, gaps and hushed comments as her sneakers connected with the Second District. What the hell was their deal? It wasn't like half of these people hadn't seen something similar at least twice a week.

Leon and what's-her-name, the annoying ninja constantly trying to pick her pockets, could pretty much pull off the same stunt.

"Damn it..."

Falling like a puppet with its strings cut, Ryuko collapsed onto the bench outside the most famous, if not outright expensive, boutique in Traverse Town. She was getting sick and tired of Maleficent's crap! Dealing with Heartless was bad enough. She could handle them with one hand tied behind her back. But with someone like the bitch controlling them? A psychopath who didn't care about innocent civilians and collateral damage?

That made everything a million times worse.

If - no, *when* - she found Maleficent, and she would find the sorceress, the self-professed 'mistress of all evil' would personally experience the unique sensation of having Threadcutter shoved up her ass.

["Sorry about that."](#)

The bench's other occupant, an enormous mountain of an individual whose presence drew more than their fair share of attention, remained silent. Not that she blamed him. The Heartless were drawn to the Keyblade. It didn't matter if Maleficent was controlling them. As long as she drew breath, the monsters would relentlessly seek her powerful heart. But the dark beige and maroon sweater vest and matching khakis? Yeah, she could insult that particular choice of *really* bad fashion any day of the week, "Didn't think the Heartless would appear so damn quickly."

Ryuko Matoi - Age 28

Keyblade Master

"Why are you apologizing?"

Ira Gamagori's taciturn voice resembled rocks tumbling inside a washing machine.

Despite having recently celebrated his thirtieth birthday in perhaps the most obnoxious manner physically possible, due in no small part to Matoi's delinquent influence and the pressure from his colleagues and associates, he didn't look a day over twenty-four. A testament to impeccable genetics and good fortune, "The Heartless fell beneath the might of your Keyblade before anyone lost their hearts. Your quick thinking and personal responsibility ensured Maleficent's ambush was nothing more than an embarrassing disaster."

"Thank god for small favors, right?"

It felt like a massive weight dropped from her shoulders. An ambush was one thing. She could take down dozens of Heartless with one arm tied behind her back. But an army numbering the hundreds? No matter how good screwing with Maleficent's plans felt, knowing nobody had to worry about their husband or wife or children was the best news she'd heard in weeks.

"But her bitchiness is pissing me off!"

Ryuko imagined punching the arrogance off the sorceress's face. She didn't know how the bitch got away. And remembering how close she'd gotten caused the corners of her mouth to twitch. Maybe it had something to do with magic. Or the evil fairy had one final trick up her sleeves. But after cornering Maleficent on some world where water flowed from the ground to the sky, darting through magical thunderstorms and living fire, leaping from floating island to island while constantly moving closer, something disgusting and invasive attempted to worm its way into her heart.

Just thinking about that nauseating darkness made her want to snarl.

But before she could pound Maleficent's face inside-out, only with her knuckles and not Threadcutter, the bitch fled like a goddamn coward.

"Once I find that hole she's crawled into, I'm gonna make sure she *doesn't* walk away."

There was nothing better than the unvarnished truth. He knew that better than most. To speak the truth, no matter how unfavorable or disadvantageous doing so might be, spoke highly of one's standards. Therefore, folding arms larger than most people's thighs across his massive chest, brows knitted into a furrowed frown, Gamagori drew forth such knowledge without hesitation, "One cannot question the strength of your heart. You're a Keyblade Master. Your authority surpasses even that of kings and regents. But must you speak with such vulgarity and uncouth language?"

"Geez, will you give it a rest already?"

She didn't know what was more annoying - his 'friendly' advice about her manners or him thinking she would start acting prim and proper. Probably the first. But after months of hearing him repeat the same question, she was starting to lean towards the latter, "I know you mean well, but seriously, shut the hell up."

Lurching forward on the bench, both of her sneakers slapped against the ground. If that bastard hadn't been lying, Maleficent had a secret lair hidden from prying eyes. And she believed Pete's every word, especially when the guy nearly wet his pants under threat of getting his face rearranged.

"Because we can't *all* be angsty and perpetually frowning bitches like Satsuki."

A muscle twitched underneath Gamagori's eye, "You will address Lady Satsuki with respect."

"Lady Satsuki?"

That unintended little slip-of-the-tongue earned her undivided attention. And despite the annoyance radiating from the mountain of muscle's steel-forged heart, a shit-eating expression pulled upon her

lips, "Eleven years and you're still calling Satsuki something that damn adorable, huh?"

"Think carefully about your next choice of words, Matoi."

As expected, the overbearing former Disciplinary Committee Chairman's patience visibly strained under the pressure. Something normally unshakable despite Mako's shenanigans and overeager personality. One finger tapped against a massive bicep. His mouth pursed into a grimace sour enough to curdle milk. One eyebrow twitched. But only after a noise similar to someone kicking a chocobo bubbled in the back of Gamagori's throat did the mountain of a man speak, "You might have rescued me. And for that, I'm eternally grateful. But I won't let you besmirch Lady Satsuki's honor."

"Besmirch? Hell, if anything, I'm bein' totally honest with my feelings."

Rolling her eyes at the frustration sent her way, Ryuko folded both hands behind the nape of her neck and yawned. Loudly and obnoxiously. Blah. Blah. Blah. If she wanted to hear the guy preach nonsense about Satsuki, she'd hang around Alexandria, "Satsuki ain't a princess. So, here's the deal. Unless she starts wearing a crown, I'm gonna keep treating her the same way I treat everyone else... Shnookums."

She didn't think it was possible, but the veins in Gamagori's forehead literally twitched.

"HOW DARE YOU -"

DING-A-LING!!!

The bell over the boutique's door jingled as a foot pushed backwards, heel first, followed by the rest of its body. Struggling to hold onto the nearly twenty boxes and bags she'd purchased over the span of nearly an hour, Mako Mankanshoku smiled despite the precariousness of her situation. Trembles wracked her arms. Her

body visibly shook. But with her chin propped on top of the stack of boxes in her arms, cheeks blushed red from exhaustion and dozens of bags hanging from her elbows, she steadied herself against the relentless force of gravity.

"All done!"

With a childish and defiant huff, Mako blew a strand of hair off her eyes, then again when it didn't listen, only to notice Ryuko sitting next to Gamagori, "Aw, I missed the big fight?"

"Afraid so."

Ryuko almost winced. It sounded like someone kicked Mickey's dog. Her heart felt like it was shattering into tiny pieces. But brushing aside those intense and overbearing feelings, she nonchalantly shrugged while affording her best friend a reassuring smile, "But hey, don't worry. I showed those Heartless who's boss!"

"Really!? Did you use the super cool finishing -"

The simultaneously formidable yet adorable woman's question ended mid-climax when her shoe slipped on a piece of trash.

Faster than someone of his enormous stature should have been able to move, Gamagori sprang into action. He grabbed the individually-signed bags bearing the boutique's logo. One by one, before Mako's balance completely vanished, he stacked the boxes stenciled with the same signature, only in shades of obnoxious purple, on his broad shoulders. And after ensuring she wouldn't stumble or fall to the ground, courtesy of lightly pressing his hand against her back, he stood tall, multiple bags hanging from his fingers.

"Watch your footing."

Straightening his back until he loomed over not only Mako and Matoi, but the very entrance of the boutique, the masochistic man's granite-like expression softened, "Are you alright?"

"Thanks for the save, Shnookums!"

With a smile and giggle, Mako pecked her husband in the middle of his cheek. A gesture of undying affection. And immediately upon finishing, while her husband's blush spread turned shades of red, she twisted sideways, grabbed his bicep and used the muscle as a springboard. Her knee-length frilly white skirt, adorned with bunnies, chocobos and moogles, billowed when she plopped onto the bench next to Ryuko.

And then, while still bouncing upwards, scooched over several inches until she was literally pressed against her best and oldest friend in the entire universe.

"I really appreciate this trip, Ryuko."

The master shrugged despite having a nose-full of raspberry-scented conditioner.

"Eh, it's no big deal."

Not bothered by Mako's insistence on thanking her every ten minutes, or every time they found another store selling cute things, Ryuko returned the cavity-inducing smile, "One of the perks of bein' insanely rich is not worrying about money. Besides, like I said, this was my treat."

"Oh, right..."

Grabbing the hem of her skirt, legs swinging back and forth, cheeks puffed from worry and embarrassment, Mako stared at the ground between her shoes, "Ira won't say it, because he's super embarrassed and doesn't like admitting you're right about anything, especially after what happened with the Kupo Nuts, but he's really happy you're here."

The enormous mountain of a man grumbled, both from Mako's admission and the random children whispering at his back.

"Heh... do I gotta keep repeating myself?"

After giving her friend a quick *bop* on the head, something that immediately deflated Mako's worry, Ryuko chuckled, "You're my friend. I'd do anything for you. Including beating the snot out of Heartless and their pathetic bosses."

In the middle of the plaza, etched with carvings of Traverse Town's landmarks and buildings, an enormous manhole shifted.

"C'mon! I'm sure you have loads of super-important Keyblade stuff to do!"

Mako held her hands together, swinging an imaginary Keyblade back and forth, "Like that one time you grabbed Pete and -"

BANG!

"What the hell?"

Threadcutter materialized in an eruption of crimson stars when the manhole exploded into the air. As screams filled the Second District and people fled to other parts of Traverse Town or inside buildings, Ryuko leapt onto the bench. With one sneaker perched on the back and Keyblade propped in front of Mako, she waited, heart racing and teeth clenching, for whatever monster *dared* show its ugly face to make the last wrong choice of its life.

But when a gloved hand reached out of the sewer, followed by the rest of something that *wasn't* a Heartless, the tension deflated like an old balloon, "Oh great, *him* again..."

["If you'll excuse me..."](#)

An almost serene calmness washed over Gamagori. His voice lacked any turmoil. Any anger, frustration or other emotions. Instead of screaming at the top of his lungs, an act befitting an immature teenager, he placed the bags and boxes onto the bench. He

adjusted the collar of his sweater vest, muscles bulging under the fabric. And only once that was finished, fully aware of the hulking feline version of Frankenstein's monster crawling out of the sewers, the mismatch of clothes and stitches betraying its origin, did he turned around, "I must address our uninvited guest."

Ryuko snorted under her breath.

It wasn't a Heartless or Nobody or even an Unversed from way back in the day. But she waited. With eyes narrowed and lips pursed into a grimace, she waited until the last person fled to safety. Until the streets were empty apart from Mako, Gamagori, herself and the bastard. Light shimmered around Threadcutter. A translucent crimson barrier manifested around the abandoned plaza. And once the magic settled firmly into place, she collapsed back onto the bench,

"Knock yourself out."

What transpired between Gamagori and monster over the next several minutes would forever be etched into Traverse Town's folklore.

"Come on, honey!"

Standing on top of the bench, Mako threw a punch as her husband, who'd grown equal in stature to the monster, escaped its grappling hold and countered with a haymaker, "Show him the old one-two!"

"Hey, are there any sodas left?"

As the courtyard trembled from Gamagori pile-driving the creature head-first through the street after it belched in his face, Ryuko reached into her purse, which she'd left behind when the Heartless ambushed them, "Wait, yeah. I got one."

"Oh, I meant to tell you way earlier, Ryuko, but it totally slipped my mind."

A hiss of carbonated air as she popped open the can was the only thing Ryuko cared about.

"I guess Ira wanted to tell you. Or maybe he didn't? Huh..."

Half-listening to Mako as Gamagori bulldozed through the creature's megaton punches, which involved taking them like a champ, Ryuko chugged the warm soda.

"Anyway, me and Ira are thinking about having a kid. Surprise!"

Ryuko promptly spat out the drink.

Last edited: Feb 22, 2019

Even's Reports - I & II

Even's Report I

*It would appear my reservations concerning the feasibility of Xehanort's project were unwarranted. Through careful reconstruction of the precise conditions necessary for the heart to succumb to darkness - with the data *I* collected - the Manufactory has successfully produced several such creatures. The beings Xehanort calls... Heartless. At first glance, I presumed they were related to the Unversed which once plagued Radiant Garden. Perhaps a subspecies or evolutionary (is that possible?) offshoot. However, contrary to my expectations, these artificial Heartless were different from the shadows lurking in the castle sublevels.*

For that reason, and to differentiate them from their common brethren, we've decided to mark the artificial variety with an emblem.

As I wrote my thoughts, Ienzo and Aelex are assisting Xehanort with modifications to the Heartless Manufactory. He's impatient with the number of creatures produced and wishes to increase the overall output. A dangerous idea. One I've critiqued several times only for Braig to overrule my objections. But what if something were to go wrong? It would take only a single misplaced variable for the manufactory to go out of control. In such a worst-case scenario, thousands of artificial Heartless would be created. They could overrun this world and countless others.

Does the thought of such catastrophe even sway Xehanort's heart?

At first, I thought he was a man of science. Someone pursuing the secrets of the heart out of nothing more than genuine curiosity. But with each passing day, something dark and bitterly cold grows inside his heart. I fear it's only a matter of time until he does something completely reprehensible.

Yet I find myself strangely unconcerned with Xehanort's darkening ambitions.

In another universe, perhaps one where events unfolded slightly differently, I'd confess everything to Lord Ansem. Or delve into the darkness as well. Indeed, the long-term ramifications of not only understanding darkness, but controlling it, could change the fabric of reality. To think, if the conceptual designs Xehanort discussed with myself and the others the other day bear fruit, it might be possible insulate the heart from the more dangerous side-effects of darkness.

But I cannot discard months of research.

Not when I'm so close to making a breakthrough.

Even's Report II

*As per Lord Ansem's orders, I've composed daily reports containing my ongoing research. He wishes to know everything about my progress. Including any major discoveries. And while I tell him the truth, my reports are heavily sanitized. Not at Xehanort's insistence, although he would likely agree with my decision, or even Ienzo's worry about my obsession, but due to scientific curiosity. And although the thought of betraying Lord Ansem's trust causes my hands to tremble, I **must** continue researching the parasites, no matter what it takes.*

No matter what I must do.

And for better or worse, these parasites truly are remarkable!

Every time I unravel another one of their secrets, more questions emerge. If I didn't know better, I'd believe something was mocking my efforts. Not only are the parasites tougher than most of my standard equipment, save orichalcum and mithril-hardened adamantite, when spun into rope-like structures, their hardness and tensile strength further increases. They are highly resilient to temperatures exceeding several thousand degrees. They can

survive nearly absolute zero with no short or long-term repercussions. They constantly radiate a strange mixture of light and darkness unlike anything I've ever witnessed. And when introduced to sources of magic, no matter the form, they devour everything. And upon finishing, manipulate the digested energy into additional mass.

But there's something far more disturbing and insidious about the parasites than their physical characteristics and reproduction cycle.

When brought into physical contact exceeding more than 2.5 seconds with living subjects (see Subject 18A Event Log), the parasites become rabid. Through visceral and utterly horrific means impossible to describe in writing, they 'cover' as much of the host as physically possible. And upon successful completion of this behavior, proceed to drain the subject of vitality, blood and everything else. If not removed quickly enough, little will remain of the subject beyond a desiccated corpse. Not even the heart escapes. This method increases the overall mass of the parasites faster than magic.

Perhaps it's due to absorbing physical mass instead of magic?

But after the incident involving Subject 29F, my first, and only, human subject, I have limited further experiments to rats and other rodents. While the damage to my lab was thankfully minimized, and my injuries nothing more than scrapes, what the parasites did to Subject 29F was nauseating. My stomach heaves at the memory of her twisted and monstrous form. And her screams of pain and torment haunt my nightmares.

It is for these reasons, I've decided to call the parasites - Life Fibers.

For they are anathema to life itself.

Chapter 11.2 [NEW]

*Here is the second of the three revisions. While this doesn't have the *massive* changes of the first (and the third), there is still more than enough that anyone who read the first version should read this one. Maleficent is stated to be one of the strongest and most powerful magic-users in the Realm of Light. The evil version of Yen Sid, if you will. Her presence was enough to frighten Mickey, who she did not find any more concerning than a mere annoyance. Out of the Disney villains, she, and she alone, posed the greatest threat to Sora. And so, using that, I significantly changed her battle against Ryuko. Well, significant might be the wrong choice of word. Rather, I added a lot of detail. Including the fact that Maleficent knew about Ryuko's battle against an unknown adversary *and* that the woman was looking for her (i.e. threatening Pete) but viewed Beatrix, who bested the Cloud of Darkness, as the greatest threat to her plans for gathering the Princesses of Heart.*

An initial assumption that she quickly corrected. For while prideful and arrogant, when facing a threat she takes completely seriously, Maleficent can be frighteningly innovative and imaginative. Case in point - when magic doesn't work on Ryuko, she originally (in this version) turned towards indirect means of inflicting lethal and debilitating damage to the master.

I hope you enjoy re-reading it.

[img: https://www.khwiki.com/images/2/27/Maleficent_KHIII.png]

"Oh, uh, wow..."

Pete considered himself quite the sturdy fellow. It was one of his better qualities. Well, next to his charming good looks, muscular and popularity. Why, if it hadn't been for that Keyblade wielder messing with his plans, he would have won the Million Dreams Award! And if that no-good backstabber Gilgamesh ratting him out to the guards,

he would've cleaned house at the Festival of Champions! Humph! The nerve of that guy! Acting like they didn't have a deal to throw the fight! It was downright embarrassing to lose in the first round to some nobody.

Especially when he'd already prepared nefarious and brilliant ways of dealing with the other fighters.

"She's sure putting up one heck of a -"

It felt like getting socked with a boxing glove. Or zapped by magic. Out of nowhere, the magical telescope doohickey above the table burst into light, leaving little spots dancing before his eyes. The power repelled the shadows and darkness. And it left him staggering backwards, one hand covering his eyes and the other searching for the nearest piece of furniture.

"Ouch! That smarts!"

Ryuko was stronger than he remembered. A heck of a lot stronger. Seeing the broad tear through the Heartless like a whirlwind of destruction shook his nerves. And blinking away the tears in his eyes, followed by a quick shiver of his spine for good measure, he coughed. Those had been some of the meanest, nastiest and strongest Heartless he could find. It had taken weeks gathering enough of the annoying creatures to satisfy Maleficent. Not that she was happy. The witch was never happy with his progress. Oh, if only Ryuko wasn't around to mess up their plans.

But his thoughts of imaginary revenge screeched to a standstill when fire, lots and lots of magical, white-hot fire, filled the room.

Faster than he could swallow the lump in his throat, Ryuko began tearing through the Heartless. The massive army of Heartless, once numbering in the hundreds, was gone. Except for one. The super-powerful, extra-mean monstrosity lured from the Realm of Darkness. Something that made those ironclad suits of armor patrolling Traverse Town look like rank amateurs and chumps. And despite

knowing Ryuko was anything but a novice, his jaw dropped when the short-tempered broad strutted away from the ginormous Heartless. Cold dread whispered into his ears when she disappeared into thin air.

And he broke into a cold sweat when the humongous Heartless exploded into bits of darkness.

"Ya know, it's a good thing you and me ain't there."

Well, that settled the question he'd wondered since fleeing for his life. Ryuko was still more terrifying and scary than any Heartless. Maybe even Maleficent. Not that he would ever tell the witch to her face. Or within earshot. Or on the same world. He didn't have experience dealing with any of the other Keyblade Masters. Not even Beatrix or whatever the one-armed master's name was. But anyone who could fight Maleficent to a standstill was bad news. And someone, especially a short-tempered broad with a chip on her shoulder, able to win?

Nothing in the whole universe could make him fight Ryuko.

Not power or infinite money, although being richer than Scrooge McDuck was tempting.

Or even ultimate knowledge, whatever that meant.

Because he still had nightmares.

The day had started the same as any other. He'd been going about his business of looking for strong hearts to turn into stronger Heartless. The more darkness inside the hearts just dying to come out, the better. And there had been a couple of hearts full of darkness. All in all, it had been a pretty good day. Suddenly, out of literally nowhere, Ryuko had burst through the wall directly over his head. Not over. Or around. But *through*. And he, of course, immediately knew who she was. Which is why he panicked, gasped, screamed and did almost everything other than faint.

"What... how... who... when..."

He'd known Keyblade Masters were powerful. But the devastation in Twilight Town had been something else. An entire forest reduced to cinders and ashes. It had been before her fight with Ryuko, but Maleficent claimed the broad fought someone equivalent in both power and magic. A being whose heart radiated unfathomable light and darkness. All without standing in the flames and smoke for more than a few seconds. After that, he stopped listening. Nobody could match the evilest sorceress in the cosmos! Not some weird Keyblade Master. Not the Black Mage herself. Or anyone else.

That stopped when Ryuko burst through the wall, grabbed his shirt by the collar, spun around and slammed him to the ground.

"Where's Maleficent!?"

Right before punching her dainty-looking fist through the ground next to his head.

"Start talkin' or I'm gonna turn your face inside out!"

"So, uh, what are we going to do now?"

The only other occupant of the shadowed chamber uttered nothing in response to the question. Their yellow eyes, shadowed by violet make-up and possessing intelligent far surpassing even the most gifted mages and wizards, focused upon Ryuko's flickering image above the magical sigil. A frozen semblance of the master caught mid-battle, streams of vermilion light trailing behind her Keyblade. Sharpened fingernails, colored shades of maroon, curled around the exceptionally-simple staff in their hand. Painted lips twisted into an expression uglier than humanly possible when the battle replayed itself.

Not once, but twice.

And only when she finished, having ascertained everything necessary, did Maleficent coldly sneer.

["How irritating."](#)

Her cold fury seeped into the very foundations of Hollow Bastion. The castle trembled underneath the weight of her indignation. Anger, pure and unadulterated, consumed the shadows themselves. The bilious green flames encircling the chandelier above the table sputtered and flickered. Across the room, the buffoon cowered prepared for whatever punishment awaited such egregious failure. But as quickly as the writhing darkness manifested itself, her otherwise flawless and perfect features, marred by a single scar curling around her chin, smoothed into a porcelain and unreadable mask.

"As expected, the Heartless were no match for her."

A wave of manicured fingers, darkness and magic clinging to the crystalline orb adorning the staff held within them, removed the obstinate master's image from her presence. If not for his usefulness, she would have already banished Pete back to his prison. While the lowbrow buffoon focused on Ryuko's brutality, speed and strength, *she*, mistress of all evil and soon-to-be-queen of existence, a sorceress compared to Lulu, saw beyond the master's physical characteristics.

It had necessitated sacrificing a significant amount of Heartless. Far more than anticipated. Not simply on this ambush, but several previous attempts. Time would be required to replenish their ranks. But her concern for the foul creatures was nonexistent. They were a means to an end. Pawns to be discarded at her convenience. And in this case, the Heartless served their *true* purpose flawlessly.

"This ain't nuttin' but a small setback!"

Oblivious to the grandiose scheme sharpening the darkness within Maleficent's blackened heart, Pete ignored the cold sweat trickling

down his face and neck, "Give me time! I'll go out and round up some more Heartless! Ones bigger and stronger and meaner than -"

"Enough of your pathetic sniveling!"

The buffoon's incessant whining grated upon her nerves. For one moment, could the oaf stop talking and use what little intelligence he possessed? His voice was like fingernails dragging down chalkboards, "Do you think Ryuko destroying those Heartless wasn't planned? That I, of all people, didn't anticipate she would emerge victorious?"

"Oh... I, uh, guess I didn't."

Baffled by the newfound information, Pete scratched his forehead. Ever since almost losing to Ryuko, not to mention needing help recovering her strength, Maleficent had been sending their Heartless after the broad. Almost like it was personal or something. But now that he thought about it, Maleficent never seemed upset - well, more upset than normal - when Ryuko walked away without so much as a scratch, "You sayin' those Heartless were nuttin' but bait?"

"Precisely."

The slow-witted imbecile might have escaped Ryuko's relentless determination with nothing more than an inconsequential slap on the wrist, but she'd experienced far more than wounded pride at the master's blade, "It took longer than expected. I'd begun to believe she caught onto my schemes. But Ryuko finally lowered her guard. And with it, exposed the source of her eldritch power!"

She *abhorred* Ryuko.

When her army of Heartless overwhelmed Hollow Bastion, transforming the majestic city of light into her personal cathedral, the masters had deemed her existence unnecessary. Or so the disgusting fools claimed. And yet, she'd respected their power. Beatrix, who decimated the Cloud of Darkness, a Heartless *she*

dared not antagonize, losing nothing but a single arm as sacrifice. A compatriot of Xehanort. One of the few beings the old master had feared before his passing. Out of the four masters, Beatrix had been her main concern. Pete might have complained about Ryuko, but she'd believed the legendary paladin, despite being crippled, posed the biggest threat to gathering the remaining Princesses of Heart.

Even observing the aftermath of Ryuko's brutish conflict with an unknown assailant had not changed her preconceptions.

The so-called 'god of the dead's' specific warning about provoking the Keyblade Master, lest she incur the wrath of something far more monstrous than Charybdis and Scylla, had fallen upon deaf ears.

Her magic rivaled - no, exceeded - that of the great Merlin's. Her repertoire of black magic surpassed the Black Mage Lulu's. With nothing more than an errant thought, she could call upon raging storms and razor-sharp winds. A sweep of her arm could summon infernos of blistering flames and tornadoes. If she wished, fragments of rock could rain down upon her enemies. A single slam of her staff against the ground could force those who've crossed her path onto their hands and knees, muscles and bones straining against gravity far more intense than physically possible.

Ryuko might have defeated Ardyn Lucis Caelum, a being whose darkness eclipsed her own, but the master would find her, the mistress of all evil, different. She would not underestimate the Keyblade's power! If confrontation became necessary, their battle would be short and swift!

Such thoughts now felt utterly ridiculous.

"Observe."

Emerald, hints of beryl and darkness tainting the proud color, danced between her fingers as Ryuko reappeared above the magical sigil. Another wave of her hand magnified the image several-fold. And painted lips curled upwards, exposing the first satisfaction she'd felt

in months, at the shimmering thread unraveling from the master's index finger.

"Uh... a string?"

She was *far* too pleased to care about the idiot's ridiculous question, "A Life Fiber."

After nearly a year, Ryuko eventually tracked her down. A cruel twist of mockery after preparing herself for Beatrix or, perhaps, the Black Mage herself. Yet neither hubris or pride had clouded her judgement. If the master wished to throw away what meager existence she possessed, so be it. She, the great and powerful Maleficent, would return Ryuko's corpse to both sister and master.

A warning for those who dared stand in her path!

But a scant two seconds into their battle, long enough to observe lightning, fire and ice brush against Ryuko's flesh without leaving a mark, opened her eyes. There weren't many beings capable of resisting magic, elemental or otherwise. She, herself, could withstand all but the most powerful magic. A paltry magician or mage would fare little better against her protective spells than the tides could resist the pull of the moon! Thus, when obliterating the master through overwhelming firepower failed, she'd shifted to other, increasingly imaginative, means.

From scorched dunes to frozen tundra, salt-filled oceans and tropic islands, the master had pursued her across the worlds like a relentless beast. Through either the Keyblade or the ruby light shining from her heart, Ryuko had remained several steps behind. Never lagging. Yet never catching up. It had been infuriating and insulting.

But it was upon reaching the third world, blood splattered across the flared collar of her robe from a temporarily broken nose, where she witnessed Ryuko's monstrous regeneration with her own eyes. She'd unleashed a symphony of darkness. A waltz of unstoppable magical

power. An orchestra of elemental forces the likes of which even the Black Mage would believe impossible to behold. As anticipated, Ryuko avoided every attack. Dozens of various elemental projectiles deflected or avoided. Except for one. An earthen spike which thrust itself out of the ground when the master stepped upon the invisible sigil.

To her immense delight, the attack had pierced Ryuko's stomach from front to back, spewing blood across the environment.

At the time, perhaps vainly, she never questioned why the woman hadn't utilized protective magic. Why instead of boosting her defenses with magic, Ryuko relied upon nothing more than her Keyblade and that other blade.

Yet watching flesh *knit* itself together, allowing Ryuko to continue fighting without restoration magic or hesitation, instilled a sense of modest concern. And for the first time since their battle commenced, she'd realized *how* Ardyn Lucis Caelum was obliterated from existence.

"Ryuko must be their source."

By the fifth and final world, increasingly desperate and exhausted, floating amidst the raging maelstrom as the master leapt from floating island to island, constantly moving beyond the reach of her magic, one last strategy had materialized in the depths of her heart.

An endless ocean of shadows existed alongside overwhelming light within the master's heart. It was an impossible paradox. But she hadn't cared about the latter. What purpose did light serve besides blinding one's heart to the truth? And compared to that poor boy frightened of his own shadow, Ryuko's powerful heart had overflowed with darkness. It was breathtaking how incomprehensible the shadows ensnaring the master's heart were. Which was her opening. All it required was a small push. A nudge, if she were to be so bold as to confess, on that very darkness for Ryuko to lose control.

And thus, when their battle reached its climax within those tumultuous thunderstorms, arcs of lightning and solidified emerald fire following her immense will, darkness enveloping her form as a protective, unbreakable shield, she 'whispered' to the master's darkness.

It had been a nearly fatal mistake.

Attempting to manipulate Ryuko's heart had been akin to grasping water between one's fingers. The more she tried, the more she strengthened her darkness, the more the woman's heart not only resisted, but *sapped* her magic. She'd nearly perished. For during that brief and tenuous connection between their hearts, *something* significantly older and stronger than herself had whispered back. Her heart and mind had stiffened. Muscles underwent petrification. And pain blossomed down the right side of her body.

Courtesy of the aggravating master's *other* blade.

"The one mentioned in that man's reports."

The man, one of Hollow Bastion's former residents, had been a scientist. Perhaps an associate or contemporary of Ansem, whose notes regarding the Heartless had proven quite beneficial for her plans. Yet instead of darkness or weaknesses common to the hearts of men and women alike, he focused his intelligence on something far more insidious than the Heartless. He studied eldritch parasites whose existence was anathema to life itself. Life Fibers, as he so eloquently named them. His notes detailed their properties and characteristics. He wrote how Life Fibers devoured magic. As well as other, more horrific experiments on living subjects.

At first, she refused to believe the researcher's notes as anything besides the insane ramblings of a madman. Thaumavores couldn't exist. And if they did, the Keyblade Masters would've long since eradicated them. But then she witnessed the aftermath of Ryuko's confrontation with an unknown adversary.

And two years later, her brush with death destroyed any lingering doubts.

"Now I understand why our confrontation had been disproportionate in Ryuko's favor."

Maleficent cupped the crystalline orb resting atop her staff, yellow eyes narrowing to dangerous slits at the sharpened memories. Her voice became as cold as death. Every word uttered lengthened the shadows. Mounting anger fueled the shadows oozing from her robe across the stone floor, "Her body is woven from Life Fibers. In the same way you and I are made of flesh, Ryuko's existence *is* Life Fibers. She is their puppet. Or perhaps, they are *her* puppets. Which greatly complicates things..."

"Hmm... Life Fibers, ya say?"

Slouching forward, mouth slightly parted and a vacant look in his eyes, the former steamboat captain wracked his mind. He knew Ryuko was tough as nails. But what did her impressive strength have to do with Life Fibers or whatever? No way could some fancy string make anyone, especially a really scary person like that broad, strong enough to give Maleficent a run for her money, "The stuff kinda looks like yarn if ya ask me."

A lightbulb flickered above his head.

"Hang on! I got an idea!"

It was brilliant. It was downright amazing. Out of nowhere, the idea hit him like a ton of bricks. Oh, nobody, not even Maleficent, could call Pete stupid after hearing this. Not now and not ever, "If she's made outta string or whatever, all we gotta do is find somethin' that'll cut them! Like a pair of giant scissors. Or maybe one of those fancy moogles knives! Or -"

"Don't be absurd."

Refusing to so much as humor the buffoon's ridiculous suggestion, lest his idiocy sap her own intelligence, Maleficent pivoted on the spot. The regality of her stride and posture masked the faint limp affecting the right side of her body. A wound no amount of restoration magic or darkness could alleviate. Manicured fingers tightened around the deceptively-simple staff while painted lips twisted into a snarl. Tattered robes billowed in unfelt breezes. Amber eyes narrowed. And without another word, she strode towards the open window professing the glory of Hollow Bastion.

Such a desolate world was perfect for her plans. The incomprehensible number of Heartless drawn to the world by Ansem's experiments concealed her presence from those bearing the Keyblade. Not even Ryuko or the great Beatrix could sense her darkness. And so, gazing upon the once beautiful landscape with amusement, Maleficent stared downwards. Her shadow extended forth, streaking down the patchwork exterior towards the masses of darkness gathered in the deepest depths and chasms.

All while a porcelain mask concealed unbridled hatred.

Nothing in existence was invincible. Not herself. Not Ardyn Lucis Caelum. And certainly not some damned parasites! Despite their thaumavoric properties and impressive regenerative capabilities, Life Fibers *must* have some sort of vulnerability. Something the scientist overlooked but she, the mistress of all evil, would uncover. That the idiotic oaf, barely capable of stringing words into complete sentences, dared presume he knew more about Life Fibers than herself unraveled whatever remained of her tattered patience.

And yet...

"Tell me..."

Her words were bereft of anger. They clung to the encroaching darkness like a tempting snake, "During your engagement with Ryuko, did she wield her Keyblade? Or perhaps she used another weapon entirely."

"Hmm..."

Pete thought long and hard about the question. Did the crazy broad use her Keyblade? What sort of trick question was Maleficent asking? Of course! No doubt about it. Those memories of getting manhandled were awfully embarrassing, but his mind was stronger than a steel trap. Nobody could pull one over on Pete! With the darn thing pointing inches away from his handsome face, he'd gotten an up-close and personal look at the red Keyblade. Wait a second... that wasn't right. Wasn't her Keyblade red and gold? Yeah, he was absolutely certain, no doubt in his mind, her Keyblade was at least *two* colors.

And the more he thought about it, the more Ryuko's sword's shape had been all wrong.

"Now that ya mention it, she was holding somethin' that looked like an enormous pair of scissors. Err, maybe half of one?"

Caw! Caw!

Through the window, circling several times around the chandelier, Diablo fluttered briefly before landing on her shoulder. "Perhaps we've been going about things the wrong way."

"We have?"

It took a moment for the former steamboat captain to catch up. And when it did, he grinned almost as maliciously as the sorceress. He knew that look. It meant nothing but business. It meant Maleficent thought of a brilliant and surefire way to deal with Ryuko, "Great! So, what do you need me to do?"

"I shall explain... in due time."

As she gently stroked the underside of Diablo's beak, Maleficent turned her attention towards something quite intriguing. A silver haired youth, no older than fifteen, had arrived through the spaces

between worlds. A most intriguing development. The strange boy tumbled out of the darkness, collapsing onto his hands and knees like a sick dog. A guest, was it? After all this time? Yet what brought about an unnerving smile to her painted lips, something which caused the buffoon to nervously chuckle at the writhing shadows nipping at his feet, was the boy's vulnerable heart.

"For now, make yourself useful and greet our guest before the Heartless find him."

Last edited: Mar 6, 2019

Chapter 11.3 [NEW]

*Here is the third revised section. And to get straight to the point, it's undergone the most changes out of the three. I won't spoil anything, but I've decided to remove Ryuko's arrival. It didn't work. Not to mention I have other plans for her. As well as doing that, I've changed a few more things. Leon is a lot less depressed. He's now more in-line with his Kingdom Hearts personality - grumpy, unable to deal with any nonsense but still willing to help his friends. Another small change from the previous version - Yuna *doesn't* have a Keyblade. She's not a master-in-training. Rather, she's a sorceress-in-training. Lulu doesn't have a Keyblade, so why would Yuna?*

Anyway, I hope you enjoy it!

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/a/a7/Third_District_%28Art%29.png/800px-Third_District_%28Art%29.png]

CLANG!!!

The ironclad Heartless trembled under the final blow.

Once pristine blue and white metal stood cracked and dented. The darkness woven into their magical existence couldn't withstand the unstoppable light of the single weapon serving as its mortal enemy. Individual claws on its left and right gauntlets were missing, either having already disappeared into darkness or were strewn across the plaza. One of its boots was not only destroyed but left behind half an ankle of torn metal. And yet, for some inexplicable reason, the towering monster born of shadows and corruption, remained standing.

But piece by piece, it crumbled.

First its helmet clattered to the ground, rolling end over end before hitting the nearby fountain. With an ear-splitting and wince-inducing screech, its arms and legs fell into a heap. And finally, after one final convulsion, darkness rising from what remained of its body like darkened flames, the rest of the Heartless lost any remaining semblance of sentience, releasing a single glowing, slowly-spinning heart into the heavens.

"Hah... hah... hah..."

Stumbling back a step, and then another, Sora waited until the monster completely faded into darkness before collapsing onto the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Oh man..."

It felt like he'd gone three rounds with Tidus's dad. Sweat trickled down his face. Once spiky hair lay matted against his forehead. Rips and tears crisscrossed his jacket. His shoulders rose and fell with every breath. The Keyblade felt like a lead weight. And yet, despite feeling exhausted, Sora grinned. He couldn't believe they won. The other Heartless had been easy enough. You just needed to watch the ground. But their boss had been stronger. A lot stronger.

And more dangerous.

Like the red chocobos in the mountains back home. Only significantly less anger, larger and full of different tricks. But at least the Heartless, any of them, didn't know how to summon boulders out of thin air whenever someone disturbed their nests.

"That thing... was really... tough..."

With a shimmer of golden light, the Keyblade disappeared from his fingers. Besides nearly beating Leon and waking up in the hotel room, he'd been fighting the Heartless nonstop since that strange storm. It was never-ending. No matter where he went, the monsters always seemed to know exactly where to find him. Maybe Yuffie was

right about the Keyblade being a beacon to the Heartless. But that question was the furthest thing from his mind. For now, as if scared or something, the Heartless were gone. He could finally catch his breath.

"So..."

His cheeks hurt. On second thought, *everything* pretty much hurt. Not even Tidus's dad left him and Riku feeling this sore, "Who're you guys?"

"Name's Goofy."

The guy who used his awesome shield as a battering ram against the Heartless without slowing down pointed at himself, and then his friend, before chuckling, "And he's Donald! It's a pleasure to meet'cha... uh..."

"... Sora..."

He managed a lopsided smile, which must have looked embarrassingly goofy. Especially since he was still lying on the ground. But after taking his time to stand up, he waited until the world stopped spinning. He slouched forward, both hands propped on his knees, with Jecht's mocking laughter echoing in the back of his mind. But he never stopped smiling. Not for a second, "Thanks for the help! I couldn't have beaten that thing without you guys!"

"Ya know, Sora, you were havin' an awful hard time fighting that Heartless."

Goofy was somewhat befuddled.

This wouldn't be the first time he missed something. He knew a little about the Keyblade. But that was because of Master Ryuko. She was always popping into the castle with her sister to talk with the king about important Keyblade business. They were always courteous enough to ask him and Donald about their days. Really

nice folks. The sort of people who'd watch your back. But he couldn't remember anyone named Sora. Did he forget? The Realm of Light was an awfully big place filled with lots worlds. Maybe Sora's master simply hadn't visited the king.

Or perhaps they were too busy fighting Heartless to stop by and say hello.

"Are ya havin' an off day?"

His partner on their adventure across the Realm of Light couldn't contain himself any longer.

"Off day nothing!"

Donald felt his temper reaching critical mass long before Goofy opened his mouth. One foot tapped against the ground. An eyebrow twitched. It was simply the catalyst for his frustration to shoot straight into the stratosphere, "He was swinging the Keyblade like it was his first time holding it!"

"But this *was* my first time."

It was like they were speaking different languages. Every time he tried repeating himself, only with more emphasis, Donald continued ignoring him. Maybe he did mess up a few times against the Heartless. But that wasn't his fault. Fighting was one thing, but struggling with monsters relentlessly seeking his heart? No amount of training spars with Riku, Wakka, Tidus and Selphie could prepare him for *this*. And his smile, already strained, slowly cracked, "I mean, I only got the Keyblade yesterday."

"And what sort of Keyblade wielder doesn't know magic!?"

Pacing back and forth, anger and frustration emerging in spontaneous bursts, Donald tried making sense of the recent disaster that left some of his feathers burnt. To say he was annoyed would be an understatement. He was positively, absolutely furious!

Goofy's strength and his magic should have been more than enough for *anyone* bearing the Keyblade to effortlessly destroy that Heartless! But this kid, Sora or whatever, was an amateur! He had no strategy besides swinging the Keyblade, hoping to hit something!

He and Goofy had spent more time saving Sora's butt than fighting the Heartless!

"Humph!"

Finally approaching the end of his rant after much grouching and griping, Donald spun around the gnarled wooden staff acting as a conduit for his magic pointed straight at Sora, "Your master oughta be ashamed of themselves!"

"My master?"

Sora blinked at the question.

Not for the first time since getting dragged away from the islands and waking up in this strange town, he'd been asked the same question. First Leon and Yuffie. Now Donald. Why did everyone think he had a master? No one gave him the Keyblade. He didn't know the first thing about being chosen. When the Heartless attacked him and Riku, nearly pulling them into a pool of darkness, the Keyblade had appeared in a flash of bright light.

As for responsibility?

He was only fourteen. Fighting against the Heartless had been the furthest thing from summer vacation. All he wanted to do was find Riku and Kairi. They were his friends. He wanted to know if they were okay. And his parents. Did they escape? Were they alright? He knew Tidus's old man was stronger than anyone besides Ryuko. No way could the guy lose to some Heartless. Not after all those stories about beating legendary heroes. If anyone could have made it out, it would be Jecht. So, did that mean he rescued Riku or Kairi? Were they waiting for him on some other world?

Sora didn't know.

And that worried him more than anything.

"... no matter what happens... even if everything looks gloomy and bad... always trust your heart."

There was another flash of light. A burst of shimmering gold. And the Keyblade once more reappeared, its handle fitting perfectly within his fingers, "Are you talking about Ryuko?"

"Gawrsh!"

Goofy scratched his forehead. How did Sora know Master Ryuko? It wasn't like she handed out autographs left and right. Maybe everyone with a Keyblade simply knew each other by heart. It certainly explained the strange way Ryuko and Satsuki always popped into the castle whenever the king needed to talk about something important, "I didn't know Master Ryuko was teachin' anyone."

"She isn't, you big palooka."

The tranquility following the Heartless's invasion caused the mage's squeaky voice to sound higher-pitched than normal. He couldn't believe Goofy asked something so ludicrous! Ryuko might be famous, but a teacher? Humph! *He'd* make a better teacher than her! Not that he had anything against her, but Ryuko could barely fulfill her official duties without getting into impressive amounts of trouble. Like chasing Maleficent across the realm of light. Or destroying an entire forest before coming back to the castle covered in blood and half-naked besides scraps of clothing.

He had *no idea* what 'an old enemy decided to not stay dead' was supposed to mean.

But if Ryuko wasn't Sora's master, who was? It wasn't like anyone could just pull a Keyblade out of thin air. If that *was* possible,

Gilgamesh would have bragged about having one. How the king became acquaintances with that dishonorable and despicable thief boggling his mind.

"Alright..."

Walking up to Sora, which made the difference between their heights that much more noticeable, the short-tempered wizard huffed, "... how do *you* know Master Ryuko?"

"It's kind of complicated..."

Sora thought long and hard about the question. How *did* he know Ryuko? He didn't know what to tell them. So, he decided to start at the beginning, "I guess... well, back when me and Riku were kids, Ryuko rescued Tidus's dad from some distant and far-off world. She saved his life. And ever since bringing him back, every few months or so, she'd stop by our world for a couple of hours. You know, to visit. She'd tell us stories about her adventures. Or give us souvenirs from other worlds. Heh... she even let us fly her Gummi Ship across the islands once or twice!"

A wide smile stretched from ear to ear.

"But she stopped after Riku almost crashed her ship into the ocean!"

Scratching the back of his head, Sora couldn't help but laugh. That had really been one heck of a day. Ryuko scrambling for the controls. Sirens and warning lights blasting through the cockpit. Satsuki sighing in the back seat. Mako cheering from the other. Jecht laughing his head off on the beach only for Ryuko to punch him in the face. Not to mention Riku swearing his hands slipped.

"You should have seen the look on Auron's face!"

The man's expression when Ryuko stumbled out of the ship on the beach earned another chuckle, "It was priceless! Yuna couldn't stop laughing!"

"Gawrsh, that does sound an awful lot like Master Ryuko."

Goofy *knew* that should have been good enough for him and Donald. But something was awfully perplexing about Sora's story. Before the king left without so much as a goodbye, he'd told them about an important rule. No matter what, even if was to save a damsel in distress or stop a bad guy, it was wrong to interfere with the affairs of other worlds. The consequences could be disastrous. Except for Lindblum. And Alexandria. And Burmecia. And a few worlds he couldn't remember. But that was because of Regent Cid's wisdom and genius somehow connecting those worlds long before the Heartless began appearing.

"Hey, Donald..."

Turning to the court wizard still looking at Sora like the kid was suspicious or something, he scratched the tip of his nose, "I thought messin' with worlds was normally, ya know, against the rules."

"Since when has she *ever* cared about the rules?"

Donald's mood, already foul after hours of walking through Lindblum, getting lost, learning Ryuko went to Traverse Town and then getting lost again, worsened. And then, like turning over a new page in a book, his mind ground to a screeching halt, "Hold on! Did you say Auron?"

"As in *Sir* Auron?"

Upon realizing that Sora had, in fact, mentioned Auron without batting an eye, Goofy contributed his own surprise to the conversation, "The legendary guardian?"

"Well, I don't know anything about 'legendary'..."

Dismissing the Keyblade back to wherever it stayed when he wasn't fighting Heartless, Sora folded both hands against the back of his neck, "He was just some guy. A friend of Ryuko and Jecht. But

whenever he visited the islands, Auron usually brought along Yuna. She was a lot of fun! Kairi really looked up to her! I must've asked a thousand times, but man, Yuna never taught me how to walk on water."

"If Sir Auron went with Ryuko, it musta been important, Donald."

Still thinking about the confusing problem, Goofy decided to take everything Sora said at face value. It just made sense. Auron was not only a guardian, he was a friend of the great Yen Sid. He wasn't the sort of person to disobey the rules and interfere with other worlds. If he went with Ryuko to Sora's world, there must've been a good reason, "It might've been official Keyblade business."

"Hmm..."

Still more than a little annoyed but not quite infuriated or enraged, Donald pouted. He didn't like this. What were the odds Sora that knew Ryuko and Auron? It was too suspicious. But Goofy was right. Auron wouldn't go with Ryuko. Not without an important and potentially world-endangering excuse. Like the Heartless attacking or something, "I wonder if the king knew about this."

"You guys sure know a lot about Ryuko."

The raft had been Riku's idea of a summer project.

Something to pass the time.

They never *really* intended on traveling across the ocean to other worlds on a wooden raft. You'd need a Gummi Ship or a Keyblade, which Ryuko loved bringing out whenever Jecht's boasting about their 'heroic battle against that punk-ass villain' got a little too out of hand. But still, none of them could wait to see other worlds. Especially after Ryuko promised to take them on a trip when they were older. Riku wanted to see if she'd been lying about Lindblum's Grand Castle stretching into the clouds. Kairi imagined exploring

Alexandria and walking along the waterfalls falling into the mist. And he couldn't wait to see Burmecia, where it never stopped raining.

But then the storm came.

"I'm guessing she's really famous, huh?"

"You could say that."

The gunblade rolled along the contours of Leon's neck as he strode through the previously-sealed passage between the second and third districts. Darkness still clung to the air. Bitterness and numbing coldness seeped into his bones. But suppressing those feelings, pushing them to the very depths of his heart, he glanced around the plaza, eyes sweeping left to right before finally addressing Sora's question, "It's fair to say if not for Ryuko, none of us might be here."

"Really?"

If he was confused by Donald and Goofy acting like Ryuko was some big-shot hero, now Sora was completely lost, "What's that mean?"

"Ten years ago, there was this guy. Someone way worse than the Heartless. Like, a million times worse."

Pinpricks of light flickered against the shuriken flipping between Yuffie's extended fingers. The projectile's razor-sharp edges shimmered dangerously in the ambience. Orange, red and yellow splintered beneath the rapid-fire movement. And without a single drop of blood marring the unscarred digits, she caught the throwing star between thumb and index finger, never once losing her friendly smile.

"Not to mention completely evil."

For a self-professed 'master-less' wielder of the Keyblade, Sora wasn't totally incompetent. He had talent. Maybe a little more than

normal. But boy, did he need practice. How he knew Ryuko gave her a headache. And yet, it explained quite a bit. They were both 'attack first and ask questions later' sort of fighters. Kind of like herself and Leon, only with a superpowered Keyblade capable of opening pretty much anything and cutting through Heartless like they were butter.

"The guy was seriously bad news."

A shard of clay tile clattered from the edge of the roof as Yuffie leapt forward, arms spread and collapsible shuriken sliding into her glove, flipped thrice and landed between Leon and Goofy without making a sound, "And yet Ryuko kicked his sorry butt!"

"The feller's name was Ar... something. Arson, Artichoke, Anthony, Anti-"

Donald's eyebrow twitched, "His name was Ardyn!"

"Ardyn..."

Sora repeated the strange name under his breath. He'd known Ryuko was amazing. Her stories were always full of interesting details about other worlds. She bragged about the Keyblade and how Satsuki was super jealous of Threadcutter. But she never mentioned saving the universe. Or anyone called Ardyn, "Ryuko said each star represents a different world. That there are thousands, maybe more, worlds filling the realm of light."

The wind brushed against his face as he gazed at the twinkling stars filling the night sky, a multicolored tapestry painted upon an inky backdrop, "No matter how long it takes... or where I need to go... or how many Heartless stand in my way... I'm going to find Kairi and Riku! That's my promise! Even if things start looking bad and gloomy, I won't lose my way! That's why I'm going to ask Ryuko for help! Only..."

He abruptly paused, "... only if the Heartless are really this terrible, she's probably too busy saving other worlds."

"Sora, if anyone can understand what you're going through, it's Ryuko."

Years-old guilt clenched Leon's heart like a steel vice. His mouth, already pursed, further tightened. The dejection and hopelessness in Sora's eyes were familiar. Too familiar. It brought back memories. Terrible memories of Heartless running through the streets of Hollow Bastion. Monsters devouring hearts left and right. Maleficent standing in front of the castle gates watching everything with a sadistic, hate-inducing grin. But in the end, no matter how much he lost to the bitch, Hollow Bastion still existed. It might take time, but they would eventually free their world from Maleficent's clutches.

But the same couldn't be said about Ryuko's world.

"Her world was the first to fall to the Heartless."

A sharp coldness entered his voice as he tried, and only partially succeeded, alleviating Sora's misplaced guilt, "That's why I'm certain she'll help you."

"Mr. Grumpy's right!"

Feeling the need to add her two cents, Yuffie gave Leon a good, hard slap on the back, earning a familiar yet impotent grunt, "Ryuko's the sort of person to throw herself head-first into danger without thinking about the consequences. Especially when it involves her friends or the Heartless. It drives her sister crazy!"

"You're talking about Satsuki, right?"

"Oh, you know her?"

To say the greatest ninja in the universe wasn't surprised would be wrong. In fact, she was the complete opposite of surprised. If Sora knew Ryuko, what were the odds he was completely unfamiliar with Satsuki and the others? Grinning in a specific and purposefully Cheshire-like fashion, Yuffie addressed the matter at hand, "Then

you already know what happens when something wipes that permanent scowl off Satsuki's face!"

"Jecht did that once..."

Sora *vividly* remembered every detail, right down to Tidus's dad backpedaling from Satsuki. He didn't know how it started. Maybe it had something to do with Jecht commenting about Satsuki's eyebrows. Nobody really knew. But in a matter of seconds, maybe sooner, Jecht was flat on his back, blood streaming from his nose and Satsuki was no longer standing down by the water, "I think he's afraid of Satsuki now."

"You can come with us, Sora!"

Motioning at Donald, hoping his friend would get the message, Goofy excitedly nodded, "The more the merrier!"

"Are you nuts?"

Baffled, flabbergasted and confused by the suggestion, Donald's head whipped sideways, "We're on a mission from the king, remember? We can't get sidetracked every five steps!"

"But aren't we already lookin' for Master Ryuko?"

"I -"

Donald froze halfway into his rebuttal. And his staff, pointed straight at Goofy, slowly fell towards the ground. Darn it, he was right! And that made everything worse! But the expression in Sora's eyes was too much. The kid was *pleading* with both hands clasped in front of his face. Trying, and failing, to remain strong in front of Sora's embarrassing smile, he eventually and with significant resistance, involuntarily surrendered, "Alright! He can come with us! But only until we find Master Ryuko! Got it!?"

"And I'll keep an eye on Ryuko's Gummi Ship!"

Without a second thought, and certainly without worrying about Leon's withering glare boring a hole in the back of her skull, the self-professed ninja spun on the back of her heel, "Just in case, you know, she tries leaving."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

An excited, nearly childish, grin stretched across Sora's face. He couldn't believe Goofy and Donald were going to help him find Ryuko. For the first time since waking up in that alley with his face covered in layers of dog spit, hope emerged in his heart, "Let's go find her!"

"Meet'cha there!"

For a brief moment, Leon tried stopping Yuffie. But remembering past experience, instead of wasting energy on something literally impossible, he rubbed the bridge of his nose, sighed under his breath. He said nothing when she leapt onto the side of a building, ran vertically upwards, grabbed the edge of the roof and flipped backwards into the shadows. What was the point? It would just be wasted breath. From what he figured, Yuffie was probably still upset Ryuko saw through her last 'ninja' skill. Which meant she was thinking about breaking into Ryuko's Gummi Ship. An illegal act on its own, but after what happened last time, they couldn't afford that much property damage.

"Great... now I'm probably going to need to pay Yuffie's bail..."

He simply couldn't catch a goddamn break.

But scrounging several thousand Gil between himself, Aerith and Cid could wait until later.

"Anyway, Sora..."

Sheathing his gunblade without another word, Leon pushed Yuffie's future legal problems to the deepest, darkest corner of his mind,

"Around the same time you arrived, a large number of Heartless appeared in the second district."

He stoically jabbed a thumb in the general direction of the district. But maybe that wasn't quite right. The second and fourth districts were fairly similar. They both served as the central commercial and shopping sections of Traverse Town. Outside of Lindblum, this was the place to find what you wanted. But whatever happened between Ryuko and the Heartless began in the second district, moved across the third and finished in the fourth. Where, as expected of a Keyblade Master, she destroyed every last one of them, "If I was a betting man, I'd say you'd find Ryuko somewhere in that neighborhood."

"Thanks, Leon!"

Goofy gave the man his best, most respectful salute before nodding at Sora, "If we hurry, maybe we can catch her!"

"Alright!"

Sora pumped one fist into the air before hurrying after Goofy, Donald and Leon. There was a lot of stuff he didn't know about Ryuko's past. Enough to ask dozens - no, hundreds - of questions. When Auron said being a Keyblade Master meant always watching your back, had he meant the Heartless? Or something else? And what about that strange man who appeared in the secret place? He'd mentioned Ryuko by name. And then laughed when he bragged Ryuko was stronger than anyone in the entire realm of light. But right now, none of those things mattered.

Because once they caught up with Ryuko, hopefully before she left town, he could *tell* her everything.

"Huh?"

It started in the back of his mind. And then traveled into his heart. Before spreading into his arms and legs. Sora didn't know how to

explain it. Or why he suddenly stopped in the middle of his tracks. But he had the strangest feeling someone was watching him. Was he nervous? No, this was different. This wasn't like the time Tidus dared him and Riku to snatch a single feather from one of the wild chocobos. He bit his lower lip. He tightly clenched his hands into fists. And slowly but surely, heart beating a mile a minute, he turned around, anticipating nothing but empty space.

"What the..."

His eyes widened.

Someone was standing across the plaza in the exact spot the massive Heartless first appeared.

"Who're you?"

The silver drawstrings across the half-zipped pink coat swayed in the phantom breeze that left goosebumps spreading down his arms. Matching heeled boots, gloves and pants concealed even the slightest hint of bare skin. Whoever they were, they weren't that tall. Maybe a couple of inches taller than Yuffie. About the same height as Ryuko. But it was impossible seeing anything inside the pink hood covering their face. The unnatural darkness covered everything besides a soft, and maybe a little disturbingly cheerful, smile and shadowed blonde hair.

"Well, aren't you going to say something?"

When the woman giggled, it felt like something touched his heart. He never heard anything quite so strange and unnerving in his life. But once her laughter faded, she raised a finger to her grinning lips, leaned forward and emitted a single sound.

"Shh..."

"What's wrong, Sora?"

Goofy's voice snapped him out of trance.

"That woman!"

He didn't know quite how to describe anything. Or even what happened. But turning towards the captain of the royal knights, arms waving, one pointed at himself and the other towards the strange woman in the pink coat, Sora could barely contain his confusion, "She just appeared out of nowhere!"

"Huh?"

A bewildered scratching of his forehead accompanied Goofy's genuine befuddlement, "What woman?"

"She's right -"

Pivoting on the spot, Sora's heart momentarily stopped when he realized Goofy was right. The place was abandoned. Nobody was here. They were completely alone. But how was that possible? People couldn't teleport from one place to another! It was impossible! Glancing back and forth, he searched for the strange woman. He even looked up to the roofs, remembering how Yuffie left barely a minute earlier. But the woman was gone. Almost like she never existed. And after another few seconds, just long enough for Donald and Leon to notice he and Goofy had stopped, he sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck.

"Guess I was just... imagining things."

The Woman in the Pink Coat

Sometimes words cannot properly illustrate physical descriptions. Which is where photoshop comes into the picture. It's a little low-res since it came from 358/2 Days, but I think it turned out alright.

The Woman in the Pink Coat

[img:
[
AAALAAAAAABAAEAAAIBRAA7](
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Chapter 11.4

*So, finally, here is the first new section since I went back and rewrote the rest of the chapter. After ten years, Ryuko has somewhat matured. She's still the same person, but the ratio of curses to actual words whenever she's *not* angry has decreased to almost zero. She simply developed patience. Not to suggest when push comes to shove, she won't cut loose, curse up a storm and proceed to kick the crap out of someone. Because she's an actual Keyblade Master, not just in name but physical skill. Unlike Sora who, in the first game, probably due to early installment weirdness, was called the keyblade master. Something that implied a single person could wield *the* Keyblade. Ryuko, on the other hand, instills *fear* into Maleficent. The same woman who treated Sora as nothing more than an irritating child.*

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/3/34/Gamagoori_pick_drive.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20150406031933]

For better or worse, the shattering of the boundaries separating the worlds from each other vastly expanded cultural horizons.

At any given moment, thousands walked the winding streets of Lindblum. People, visitors and refugees alike, flocked to one of the last secure bastions of light. Mages adorned in armor and clothing denoting their respective schools of magic held whispered discussions. Burmecian dragon knights patrolled the Districts. And, when not getting shouted at by the Lindblum guards, stood upon various rooftops. Thieves and criminals lurked in the shadows, nervous about drawing attention to themselves from 'heroic elements'. Antiquated airships, held aloft by magical propellers, transported cargo across the city-world. Gummi ships passed through the clouds before vanishing into the infinite ocean of darkness.

And Ryuko, leisurely ascending the winding cobblestone steps, bits of moss and grass growing through the weathered tiles, weed-filled dirt overhanging the fifty-foot drop to the nearest steeped roof, smoke drifting from its crooked chimney, abruptly stopped when something brushed against her heart.

"Huh?"

Pulling out hand out of her jacket, she turned around, grabbing a mouth-full of the summer breeze whipping through Lindblum. The wind rustled her dual-colored hair. Feathery bangs swayed back and forth in front of her eyes. A commercial-class gummi ship bearing the familiar logo of Scrooge McDuck Enterprises passed over head, casting everything in darkness as she bit the edge of her lip, "Was someone..."

"What's wrong, Ryuko?"

Both of Mako's slide-on shoes hit the step at the exact same time. High above, almost at the top of the winding stairs, Ira was lugging their purchases, enough boxes and bags to fill one or two rooms. But preoccupied with other matters, she turned around, bringing her face to face with the back of Ryuko's head, "You forget something important?"

"No, it's just..."

Ryuko couldn't figure out the best way to describe the strange feeling in the pit of her stomach. She looked around. She listened to the wind, hoping to discover whatever had drawn her attention. But there was nothing. Only the ordinary afternoon sounds of Lindblum - airships flying overhead, crowds mingling far below and Gamagori's standard irritation at being left in the darkness to fend for himself, "... never mind. Just... could've sworn someone called my name."

"Oh?"

The ordinarily 'nonthreatening' housewife leaned around Ryuko, one hand pressed against her forehead. She didn't know much about the super awesome Keyblade. But it was incredibly useful when she lost her keys. If her best friend since, well, forever said she heard someone call her name, it was probably true. Even if she couldn't see anyone... or hear anything... or thought Ryuko was acting a little lonely, "Did they say anything interesting?"

"Nah, don't worry about."

Patting her friend on the shoulder, Ryuko shrugged off the question before continuing up the stairs, "Must've been imagining things."

That was one hundred percent bullshit.

And Mako probably knew she was lying through her teeth.

But nothing more was said. Nothing more *could* be said. Because she shrugged her shoulders and moved on. Which was somehow the perfect cue for Mako to turn around, wiggle her hips and raced up the winding steps, nearly bowling over Gamagori in the process. Nothing like how a twenty-eight-year-old woman should act. And coming from someone who fought physical manifestations of the darkness within people's hearts on a daily basis, that was really saying something.

Yet, as her friend waved cheerfully from the top of the stairs, the feeling only grew stronger. Was she hearing things? No. That wasn't quite right. She wasn't nuts. If anything, having a Keyblade meant everything but the absolute impossible was technically possible. She *had* heard a familiar voice say her name. Or maybe their hearts had briefly connected? Biting the inside of her cheek, Ryuko stopped walking, took a deep breath and slowly raised her hand.

Perhaps if she reached out and-

"MATOI!!! DO YOU INTEND ON DAWDLING ALL DAY!?"

And just like that, her concentration was shattered into millions of pieces.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever..."

She really couldn't care less about Gamagori being annoyed. In fact, she ignored everything he said afterwards. And for good reason. If she wanted to take her sweet-ass time climbing the stairs, maybe take in the view, sit down and rest her sore feet, what the hell would he do? Yell? Shout? Threaten her with freaking detention? He offered to carry everything. It was his decision. Something he'd mentioned at least four times. So, if his arms were tired after lugging everything from Traverse Town to Lindblum, that was his goddamn fault. And a little pathetic coming from the guy who could bench-press an air cab without breaking a sweat.

"I'm coming, so hold the damn chocobos, would ya?"

With her thoughts on the matter firmly established, Ryuko pulled her other hand out of her jacket. The winding stairs lead to an open plaza, spacious and large with trees circling around the exterior and a streetlight in the middle, its orange glow not yet visible. Off the beaten path and away from the hustle and bustle of tourists, street plays and idiots getting into brawls over stupid bets, the neighborhood was quiet and cozy. It was one of the few places in Lindblum where the sun wasn't constantly hidden behind the outer walls or Grand Castle. Perfect for someone who didn't like attention.

"Huh? Don't tell me you're still upset..."

Threadcutter manifested in an explosion of crimson stars as she rolled her eyes. Gamagori was pissed. And the guy being *this* upset meant Mako would try, at some point before the end of the day, to have them 'make up.' Which sucked. It *always* sucked. But scratching the back of her head with one hand, she marched towards the front door of her home. And swinging her Keyblade forward, elbow locking into place, a yawn escaped her lips when she shoved the large bastard, purposely pushing just hard enough to

almost knock him off balance while giving her room to argue it was accidental.

The door didn't have a key.

Oh, it had a lock.

A lock almost identical to the ones on the surrounding houses. A standard tumbler-based lock requiring a brass key. Simple. Efficient. Insecure. Which was why she'd snapped the damn thing between her fingers after buying the place.

Because she had a *much* better method of keeping out unwanted visitors.

With sneakers firmly planted on the ground, hips forward and mouth cocked into a half-smirk, her upper body twisted counterclockwise as Threadcutter shifted into position. Squeezing her fingers while Mako watched from the sidelines, entranced and excited, a pencil-thin beam of light, crimson as the undertone of her feathery hair, shot froth. The metaphysical beam connected with the door. It formed a keyhole-shaped projection above the doorknob.

And upon establishing the connection, she twisted her wrist, unlocking the door with a soft *click* coming from everything and nowhere.

"Alright, you know the drill."

Her orders were not meant for Mako, but Gamagori, whose massive form blocked the mid-afternoon sunlight. Dismissing the Keyblade back to whence it came alongside a brief eruption of crimson stars, Ryuko ignored the larger man's incomprehensible grumbling. If there was something on his mind, he should say it. She wasn't a mind reader. But that being said, while Mako raced inside, darting past dusty paintings, pictures yet miraculously healthy and thriving plants, she followed suit, one hand tucked inside her jacket and the other stifling a massive yawn.

"You can put everything in the dining room. Or anywhere really. Just don't drop anything this time."

Ignoring the guy's grumbling about 'pulling her own weight' or 'helping out,' Ryuko turned around and addressed her *other* guest.

"Sup, Satsuki..."

A shrug was her immediate reaction to the unexpected intruder. Followed by effortlessly catching the lemon thrown in her general direction, courtesy of Mako's wind-up pitch from the kitchen. Noises, sounds and random bangs filled the house. But it might as well have been background noise. Because walked into the living room, floorboards creaking and the familiar taste of dust clinging to the air, she collapsed onto the couch next to Satsuki. And then almost gagged. She could *taste* her sister's tea. The bitterness smashed against her tongue. It made her want to hurl. But after taking a massive bite out of the lemon, lips puckering almost immediately from the intense sourness, Ryuko propped both feet on the coffee table and rudely grumbled.

"Were you waiting long?"

"Only a couple of hours."

Lowering the half-filled cup of tea from her lips, Satsuki spoke slowly. Her voice, possessing a sense of maturity her younger self lack, was methodical, wasting not a single breath. Her double-breasted black overcoat absorbed the ambient light filtering through the windows to their right. A ringed mithril chain looped around her belt from front to back. An orichalcum necklace, upon which rested a sapphire crystal-shaped emblem, twinkled in the sunlight. Accentuated by a thick belt around her waist, matching pants and heeled boots completing the ensemble, she appeared the definition of nobility.

For all intents and purposes, she resembled a matured version of the Student Council President of Honnouji Academy.

Yet her steel-blue eyes, which had once petrified dozens of beings beneath their unrelenting intensity, possessed unadulterated warmth.

"How was your trip?"

Ryuko grumbled into the lemon.

"Pretty boring."

With another wet chomp, she wiped a trail of juice off her chin, "Maleficent sent another couple hundred Heartless after me. Nothing too special."

Satsuki's left eyebrow quirked barely an inch at the normally mortifying revelation, "This would be her seventh attempted assassination."

"Eh, I've stopped keeping track."

Staring at the fan spinning in the middle of the ceiling, painted white and beige blades blending together until she couldn't tell one from another, Ryuko squeezed the lemon. Her fingers dug into the pulp, sending juice streaming down her wrist. She hated Maleficent. No, hated was too weak. She *loathed* Maleficent. Just like she'd loathed Nui Harime. She didn't know how the bitch survived. It was impossible. Or *should* have been impossible. She'd watched Nui slice off her own head. And then Senketsu absorbed the Original Life Fiber, destroying whatever little remained of the Grand Couturier.

Which was why she'd gone out of her way to ensure Nui Harime didn't escape death another time. The fight had been tough. Way tougher than expected. To this day, she couldn't figure understand where the bitch got a Keyblade. Not to mention some of the other tricks, Life Fibers *and* magical, the monstrous psychopath had randomly pulled out of her ass.

But none of that mattered since she was absolutely certain, after scouring Twilight Town for any lingering traces of Nui Harime's

darkness, the psychotic bitch had permanently kicked the bucket.

"Anyway..."

A drop of lemon juice dripped onto her sleeve, "... any luck on your end?"

"Maleficent has gathered quite the arraignment of accomplices. And they're surprisingly effective."

Satsuki took a long and drawn-out breath, thoughts focusing and ordering themselves within her mind, "According to my source, she's successfully kidnapped four of the seven Princesses of Heart."

"Your 'source' say anything about her hideout?"

"Unfortunately, Maleficent had taken precautions against the mere possibility of traitors," Satsuki shook her head in the negative, earning an annoyed hiss as Ryuko sucked air between her clenched teeth, "Through black magic, she's ensured nobody can divulge her location without permission."

"Ain't that a kick in the ass..."

Annoyance and frustration washed over Ryuko's heart. She didn't know who Satsuki's source was. But they were legit. Time and time again, the info they provided on Maleficent helped counter the bitch's plans. It was because of Satsuki's mysterious traitor in Maleficent's ranks they stopped the sorceress from kidnapping one of the Princesses of Heart. And remembering that moment soured her mood more than any lemon possibly could. Because several months later, when an enormous invasion of Heartless to the Castle of Dreams required both Beatrix and her efforts to find, and lock, the Keyhole, the cowardly bitch had swooped in, nearly killed Prince Charming, and kidnapped Cinderella.

"Incidentally..."

Observing the maelstrom of emotions brewing within her sister's heart, Satsuki placed the nearly empty cup onto the small saucer in her other hand, "... Mickey has gone missing."

Ryuko nearly spat out a chunk of half-chewed lemon.

"SAY WHAT!?"

Despite the nearly deafening voice screaming inches from her right ear, Satsuki didn't flinch, "Lower your voice, Ryuko."

Grimacing at the mixture of shredded pulp and juice running between her fingers, courtesy of squeezing the lemon like a steel vice, Ryuko coughed. That hadn't been necessary. Satsuki wouldn't have said Mickey was missing in such a nonchalant manner unless he wasn't actually in trouble. Which begged another question. One that quickly filled her mind, "Alright, so I'm guessing he's not in trouble. And he's probably not hurt or nothing."

She knew how Satsuki's mind operated. More than a decade had grown her heart accustomed to her sister's strange and sometimes embarrassing behavior. Back home, she would never had imagined the Student Council President of Honnouji Academy, a formerly first-class bitch of the highest pedigree, turned into a little girl when it came to Moombas. And about one or two more things. Private things. Things that, if she so much as *whispered* the truth to Gamagori, Satsuki would swoop down upon her like a raging, unrelenting force of nature unlike anything in existence.

Which was why, instead of giving Satsuki the satisfaction of dragging out the conversation, she bit the bullet and cut to the chase.

"And *that* means you know something I don't."

"Mickey departed Disney Castle late yesterday evening without informing anyone of his decision. Nor conveying his intent to Minnie," Satsuki tucked a bang of hair knocked loose by Ryuko's shouting behind her ear. And upon doing so, swiped a thumb down the right

side of her face, removing the drool-covered piece of lemon. All without her expression tightening so much as an inch, "But he wrote a letter detailing why he chose to abruptly disappear. Instructions for Donald and Goofy to leave the castle and find you."

Ryuko suddenly found herself without much of an appetite. The lemon in her hand, already nothing more than pulp and mush, fell from her fingers onto the coffee table. It bounced and rolled across the oaken surface, leaving behind a meandering trail of yellow-white juice.

"A letter, huh?"

She knew Mickey. They were friends. He saved her ass countless times. And she pulled him out of the fire on as many worlds. Which was why this didn't make any damn sense. Mickey wasn't the sort of person to disappear without warning. He didn't keep secrets. Or lie to make her feel better. When he first heard about someone calling themselves 'Xehanort' working under Lord Ansem, he told her right away. It didn't help when the world was overrun by Heartless right before she could interrogate the bastard. But it was the effort that counted. And that was why Mickey vanishing without saying goodbye to Minnie set off warning bells inside her heart.

"So..."

The word clung to her tongue, "... I'm guessing you spoke with them?"

"I did not."

A solemn shake was Satsuki's initial response, "Captain Basch was waiting at the Grand Terminal Station upon my return. He explained everything."

"... and?"

"And as per Mickey's detailed instructions, they immediately proceeded to Lindblum," Satsuki stared at the swirls of colors floating atop the slowly cooling tea, "Unfortunately, neither of us were home, so they sought audience with the regent, who directed their search towards Traverse Town."

Without another word, having said everything necessary, she raised what remained of the bitter liquid to her lips. The wisps of steam which had once wafted upwards, filling the living room with its pleasant aroma, had dissipated. In their place, numbing both heart and mind, was melancholic nostalgia. While the bitter tea brewed by her own hands was acceptable, it nevertheless lacked something. A warmth she hadn't tasted for more than ten years. For all her efforts, she could never quite replicate Soroi's touch. Or how the man she placed upon an insurmountable pedestal brewed the leaves in just the right fashion to draw out the perfect amount of bitterness.

Ten years.

Ten long years.

The question of Soroi's survival, whether he and Iori survived the darkness which had swept across their world like an unrelenting plague, continuously tortured her heart.

She'd give almost anything to see the man she considered more of a parent than Ragyo Kiryuin one more time.

However, despite the somber introspection drawing her thoughts inwards, Satsuki focused not on the guilt of being unable to save Soroi, but Ryuko's countenance. The lack of familiarity in her sister's eyes elicited a narrowing of her own. An intake of air was followed by a silent exhale. And leaning backwards against the couch, overcoat crinkling as she crossed one leg over the other, a thick yet tapering eyebrow quirked alongside the slightest inflection in her otherwise unchanging voice, "It appears you didn't know."

"Blame *him*."

Ryuko jabbed her thumb towards the kitchen, where Gamagori was begrudgingly helping Mako sort and organize her new clothes by cuteness, color and adorableness, "He couldn't just toss that ugly-ass monster back into the sewers. *He* had to show off to Mako and pile drive the bastard into the ground. So *I* decided to leave before we got slapped with a massive fine."

A chaotic mixture of emotions swirled through her heart, "Never even knew they were in town."

She grumbled out the words. A reluctant admission her younger self, even five years ago, would never have contemplated without getting her teeth and nails yanked out one at a goddamn time. This was her fault. She was a Keyblade Master. She was supposed to lead by example. To be a shining light in the darkness. To give people hope against the encroaching legions of Heartless. Skipping town over something as trivial as a fine was bullshit. It made her feel like crap. Because she was crap for doing it. She was rich! What was a few tens of thousands of Gil to someone richer than half the people in Lindblum?

"Would've stuck around if I'd known..."

Her fist impacted the cushion before Satsuki and herself hard enough to make the floorboards creak, "But that's my fault. And I accept that. Can't blame Gamagori for messing something like this up. Gotta go back and face the music. Eventually. When I'm not busy figuring out Maleficent's end game."

The admission settled several important questions yet raised an equal - or perhaps greater - amount in return.

"Ryuko, do you know why Mickey might have left the castle on such short notice?"

It was through directly addressing her sister by name, exchanging familiarity for business, that Satsuki cut the chaff. And within the silence that followed, interrupted by Mankanshoku's pertinent

discussion with Gamagori over whether she's gained a little weight, a topic one of her oldest friends seemed intent on avoiding at any cost, her brows furrowed. A sense of her long-since discarded occupation etched memories onto her heart. The contours of her face tightened into an unreadable expression. A porcelain and well-crafted mask concealing the turbulent thoughts racing through her mind.

And only upon twilight momentarily covering Ryuko's home courtesy of an airship flying closer to the ground than normal did she sunder the tension with a single stroke.

"Or why he chose you instead of Beatrix?"

An equally familiar expression adorned her younger sister's heart.

"Yeah, I have a pretty good idea."

Ryuko allowed the words to linger on the tip of her tongue. They sat like a heavy weight, dragging her thoughts into the gutter. She knew exactly what Mickey was doing. What he was looking for. It was the only reason explaining his uncharacteristic behavior. And as everything settled into place, she folded her arms, leaned back against the couch until the high collar of her jacket pushed against her hair, and willingly allowing gravity to pull her feet towards the ground.

Thump!

Both of her sneakers hit the ground with a *bang* loud enough to draw Mako out of her imagination. But she wasn't paying attention to her friend at the moment. She only offered Mako an apologetic wave over her shoulder... a quick 'sorry' reciprocated by a much more excited 'it's alright, Ryuko'... before refolding her arms. The only thing on her mind, why she sucked her lower lip against her tongue and indignantly scoffed in a manner unbefitting of a Keyblade Master, was everything she and Mickey discussed over the last few years. Something the mouse began researching immediately after

swarms of Heartless numbering in the *millions* started hitting world after world after world.

Because in less than a year since breaching the Realm of Light in a tidal wave of unrelenting darkness, taking them by complete surprise, the Heartless consumed more than fifty worlds.

And that had been only the beginning of their waking nightmare.

"He's found the Door to Darkness."

In the background, oblivious to the seriousness of their discussion, Mako opened another box. A fancy one. Her eyes sparkled at the frilly green dress. And while she held the adorable display of fashion in front of Gamagori, who appeared genuinely interested in the string of adjectives spewing from his wife's mouth, Satsuki placed the empty cup onto the table. Light filtering through the living room window shifted as another airship flew overhead. And her expression, already focused to a hard point, subsequently tightened.

"That's... unexpected."

Her tone brooked appreciable surprise, "Although ascertaining the Door to Darkness's location explains his absentmindedness these last few months."

"Yeah..."

A tremor unrelated to nervousness rippled down Ryuko's spine as her eyes drifted towards the fan perpetually spinning in the middle of the ceiling.

"I'd been wondering about that. But every time I asked him about it, Mickey always brushed aside my questions. He said it was nothing. He was simply distracted running the kingdom and fighting the Heartless. I should've known that was bullshit."

One by one, starting with her thumb and ending with her pinkie, Ryuko cracked her knuckles. The familiar *crack-crack* of each joint popping soothed her mind. It forced her remember the constant, never-ending battles against the Heartless. Almost nine years of fighting. Each more intense than the last. At the beginning, it hadn't been so terrible. They could decimate waves of Heartless without breaking a sweat. Then more came. And more. And even more. New varieties. New types with powerful and strange magic. Heartless bearing emblems and those without them.

When the barriers around the worlds shattered into meteor showers, *she'd* been the first to panic. Well, not panic. No, she didn't scream and shout. But she *remembered* what happened last time. How mystifying showers of light preempted the destruction of everything she'd fought tooth and nail to protect.

That day, when the Heartless exploded onto the scene out of goddamn nowhere, they'd begun locking Keyholes. Starting with Alexandria. Then going to Lindblum and Burmecia before branching to nearby worlds. But finding a single Keyhole take weeks. And they weren't always successful. Which was the worst part. Because while it hurt knowing for every Keyhole locked another five worlds fell into darkness, fighting through endless hordes of darkness only to *fail* at the last moment stabbed her heart worse than any physical blade.

And that ignored Maleficent's plans concerning the Princesses of Heart.

"Only one problem."

Forcibly relaxing her fingers, leaving white indentations on her forearms that quickly shifted to deep red, she stared across her living room, focusing on the cheap-ass television gathering next to the fireplace, "Getting to the door means headin' into the Realm of Darkness. And without exception, every damn moron capable of manipulating darkness to that extent is either psychotic, insane or a total bitch."

Satsuki's eyes furrowed at her sister's detailed description.

"I would imagine Gilgamesh being the exception to that rule."

Ryuko felt the corner of her mouth, as well as half her face, several fingers and tendons in her neck, spontaneously twitch.

"Well, you'd be wrong."

Interlocking her fingers against the back of her neck, she haughtily dismissed Satsuki's comment. Not to suggest her sister was wrong. Not at all. Gilgamesh was a criminal with a record longer than her arm, but he had a decent heart. The guy *had* saved her life while giving back the Scissor Blade. Something he could have easily stolen. Well, until she chased him down and beaten his thieving ass. But that didn't mean she liked him. They weren't friends. Or rivals. Or goddamn buddies. She barely tolerated his presence on the best of days. And for one very good reason.

Because the six-armed bastard was batcrap insane.

"Anyway, one Keyblade ain't gonna be enough to close the door."

One of her shoulders itched as she stared at the cracks in the ceiling above the fan. Someday she'd need to repair that. Maybe when the universe wasn't constantly one terrible day away from getting swallowed by darkness, "You need at least two. Maybe more. That's probably why Mickey's looking for me. But that doesn't answer the obvious question..."

She stared at the dust hovering in the shafts of light filtering through the window. The particles hung in the air beyond the dual-colored strands of hair, crimson and black woven together tightly enough that not even she could tell where one color ended and the other began. And that gave her reason to peel herself off the couch. Slouching forward, the world momentarily spinning, she propped one hand on her knee, mouth pursed into a scowl.

"Like how the hell's he getting into the Realm of Darkness."

Barely a moment passed before annoyance swelled inside Ryuko's heart.

"UGH!!! Damn it..."

Her head collided with the back of the couch as another groan, louder than the first, spewed from her mouth. Lamenting her terrible luck, Ryuko pinched the bridge of her nose. Muffled grumbles and stitched-together curses, some of which didn't make sense, vibrated against the palm of her hand. As much as she refused to acknowledge the obvious, there was no doubt about it. The answer was blatantly obvious. Which only made her irritation and frustration, having long since woven into a tapestry of pure annoyance, that much worse.

"According to Mognet Central, a 'four kupo' alert has been placed around 'Agrabah' after a six-armed thief escaped with the royal scimitar Anastasia."

Satsuki's countenance remained unchanging. Despite the rampant emotions radiating from her sister's heart, a cacophony of negativity and annoyance which pressed against everything and everyone, she nonchalantly slipped one hand into her overcoat. Good King Moogle Mog XV had been particularly grateful she'd saved their world from the Heartless. And in return for not only repulsing the darkness but locking the Keyhole, which had conveniently manifested in the Great Moogles Clocktower above his throne room, he'd gifted her a rather strange device.

With a touch of her thumb against the razor-thin device, Satsuki's eyes swiveled rightward. It resembled a phone from their old world. The purpose was similar and yet, contrary to her initial expectations, the device was capable of so much more. On a whim, she'd asked Inumuta to reverse engineer the device. But to his irritation, and Ryuko's childish amusement, the phone-like device proved exceptionally resilient to his normal methods.

"And as of two hours ago, an individual with that same description was spotted by Mojito attempting to sneak out of town."

Ryuko tapped one finger against her forearm.

Her right eyebrow twitched.

But eventually, snorting through her nose while in the background, oblivious to everything, Mako held up a hat with floppy bunny ears, she slapped both hands against her knees, leaned forward and grimaced.

"Guess that means I'm headin' to Agrabah."

Satsuki's Appearance

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Last edited: Mar 2, 2019

Chapter 11.5

So, Wonderland. It's a very strange place where the mome raths outgrabe. And that's all I'm going to say.

[img:

[https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/c/c1/Bizarre_Room_%28Art%29_02.png/816px-Bizarre_Room_%28Art%29_02.png\]](https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/c/c1/Bizarre_Room_%28Art%29_02.png/816px-Bizarre_Room_%28Art%29_02.png)

Shrinking, Sora quickly realized, was not that different from Tidus's dad throwing him into the ocean at the crack of dawn.

He didn't feel any different. Besides being only an inch or two high, everything felt normal. Well, as normal as shrinking to the size of a mouse after drinking out of a mysterious bottle labeled 'DRINK ME' at the advice of a sleepy doorknob can be. He could still summon the Keyblade. He found that out first-hand after a group of Heartless, including several floating imps capable of using magic, appeared out of nowhere within seconds of shrinking. He could still talk and breathe. Oh, and luckily enough, his clothes shrank as well, allowing him to avoid the embarrassment of walking around naked.

"Alright!"

With an eager smile stretching across his face, Sora took one step back, steadied himself and sprinted straight off the edge of the table.

"YAHOO!!!"

The table might have only been a few feet above the ground. But something kept him from falling too fast. It had to be magic. There was no other explanation. And when he landed on the floor, bouncing forwards a couple of steps before stopping himself, he craned his head upwards, taking in *everything*, "This is amazing!"

"Told ya it would work, Donald!"

Holding onto the irritated court wizard as he enthusiastically jumped off the table - of course, after taking a gander over the edge, Goofy landed next to Sora. A soft landing. One quickly ruined when a wooden staff bonked him in the side of the head.

"I never said it wouldn't!"

Donald struggled. He grumbled. It took whacking Goofy upside the head for the guy to let go. And after landing on his feet, brushing off dust and whatever other nonsense covered the floor, promptly sharpened his glare, "I said we *shouldn't* drink something strange out of random bottles! What if that had been poison?"

"Poison?"

Goofy stared at the strange tulip next to the doorknob, blinking slowly as he processed the question, "Well, don't we have yer magic for that?"

The short-tempered wizard's mouth opened and closed as he desperately sought an excuse. But when nothing came to mind, he furiously waved his staff, turned around, folded his arms and huffed, "Magic can't fix everything!"

"So, this is what it's like being a mouse..."

Now he understood why the mice and oglops back on the islands constantly scurried about. From their perspective, everything looked so *big*. Seeing him or Riku or Kairi stomping into the room must've been frightening. And yet, it was amazing. Even after fighting Heartless with the Keyblade, learning magic without blowing things up in his face, travelling across the universe with their own ship and knowing even more existed out there, all thanks to Ryuko's stories, Sora couldn't believe *this* - shrinking - was possible. Actually possible. He honestly didn't know what to do first.

"Come on! Let's keep going and -"

His enthusiasm promptly deflated like a lead balloon at the snoring doorknob, "Aw man, it went back to sleep."

Well, this complicated things. If the doorknob was asleep, how would they follow the strangely-dressed rabbit with the fancy watch? Maybe he could wake it up? Stepping closer to the doorknob and cupping both hands around his face, Sora took a deep breath. And then stopped himself. No, that might make the doorknob angry. Wait, could a doorknob get angry? He didn't know. And he wasn't about to risk getting into trouble on some strange world by finding out.

"Geez..."

Letting out a loud sigh, he folded both hands against the back of his neck, "Now what?"

"Hmm..."

At the exact same time Sora reconsidered shouting at the doorknob, Goofy looked around the suddenly enormous room. There was the bed, which he'd accidentally kicked into the wall after sitting down to think. Only now there was a mysterious hole around the corner. Maybe that was the way out? But on the other side of the room, piles of purple leaves drifted inside the fireplace, disappearing and reappearing at random intervals. Could *that* be the exit? Opening his mouth to offer suggestions, he glanced up the wall and scratched his forehead upon noticing water trickling from a strange painting of a beach.

"Gawrsh, this room sure is confusing. I wonder which one's the exit?"

"Beats me..."

Mulling over that very question, Sora walked over to the hole previously hidden behind the bed. He couldn't see anything on the other side. No buildings. No people. Just a dense forest of trees, strangely-colored flowers unlike anything back home and weird signs pointing in completely random directions, "Man, this world's strange."

"Strange, my key-wielding friend, is simply a matter of perspective."

Lounging on top of the round table, tail swishing back and forth, head perched upon its front paws and an unnervingly wide grin stretching across its plump face was a purple and pink striped cat. How the cat snuck into the room was an important question. However, unlike Donald, who'd nearly leapt out of his feathers and Goofy, who returned the mysterious feline's appearance by waving, Sora gasped, more from excitement than surprise.

"A talking cat!"

The singing echoing against their ears softened. And seemingly in response to the rude, obnoxious, insulting, inconsiderate and unfriendly assumption regarding its sapience, the rotund cat casually removed the top of its head, ears, lint and fur included, "A... *Cheshire*... Cat."

"Pleased to meet'cha, Mister Cheshire Cat!"

Goofy tipped his own hat forward, "The name's Goofy! He's Donald! And he's Sora! Sorry for intrudin' in your home!"

"My, oh my, so many visitors these days."

The Cheshire Cat's yellow eyes swiveled opposite of one another as he rolled onto his back, stuck each leg at different angles and tittered, "Why, it's almost maddening. Hahaha..."

"Hey!"

As strange as it was talking to a slightly off-balanced pink and purple striped cat, Sora didn't find it *that* weird. Not when there were moogles, chocobos, moombas and other fantastical creatures across the realm of light. Although, if he was honest, the last one sounded like something Ryuko made up, "Since you're from around here, do you know which way we should go?"

"Well, that depends..."

An off-kilter chuckle filled the bizarre room as the Cheshire Cat's lackadaisical tail independently swished clockwise, erasing the lower half of his body from existence. And then, with another chortle sustained through an errant mixture of amusement, madness and glee, everything reappeared when said appendage flicked counterclockwise before twisting around his neck like an oversized scarf, "... on where... you want... to get... to."

"We're looking for the king! And Ryuko!"

Cupping one hand around his mouth, Goofy asked, "Have you seen 'em?"

"Seen... heard... laughed... take your pick..."

The slightly off-balanced, which was quite the compliment considering the twists and turns of Wonderland, feline gave another mockery of a chuckle, enough to elicit the barest sensation of unease, before fading out of existence with a distinct a polka-dot pattern, "They're all the same to me."

"Huh?"

Donald's head whipped back and forth, "Where did he go?"

"Hmm..."

While this was exciting - after all, a talking cat? Who would have thought!? - Sora couldn't make heads or tails of the Cheshire Cat. Was it truly helping them? Or was it being friendly to lure them into a false sense of security? He didn't know. But in the middle of that train of thought, something settled on top of his head. The heavy weight pushed his forward. As he blinked, a familiar pink and purple bushy tail tickled the tip of his nose. There was a chortle and giggle and off-balanced tittering. In that order. Right before the Cheshire Cat cartwheeled onto his right arm.

Now feeling lighter than a feather.

"Oh ~by~ the way, if you'd *really* like to know..."

Standing on one foot atop Sora's index finger, eyes swiveling back and forth, the Cheshire Cat pointed leftward... before immediately pointing to the right, "He went... that way!"

Goofy plucked at his lip while staring into the ominous hole next to the slumbering doorknob.

"Who did?"

With a galumphing dive off Sora's hand, the Cheshire Cat casually floated towards the floor.

"The White Rabbit."

Sora's heart skipped a beat as he turned around, looked at the exit leading to the strange forest of trees, vines, flowers and signs, and then back at the Cheshire Cat.

"He did?"

Somehow having teleported onto the chair while they were distracted by his advice, the Cheshire Cat nonchalantly examined his claws.

"He did what?"

Mildly confused by the strange question, Sora pointed over his shoulder.

"Went that way!"

The Cheshire Cat was now laying half off the chair, head tilted upside-down and grin maddeningly broad.

"Who did?"

Now it was Donald's turn to get annoyed, confused and perplexed. And by that, having listened to everything from the beginning, his temper was hovering on the very edge of a violent explosion.

"The White Rabbit!"

Sitting on top of the table, hands behind his head and an utterly vacant look on its face, the Cheshire Cat shrugged his feet, "What rabbit?"

"GAH!!! FORGET IT!!!"

Donald's eyebrow twitched as magic, more than enough to zap the cat into the next dimension, crackled around the knotted wooden staff. The infuriating feline was purposely messing with them! He just knew it! That annoying grin spoke volumes. It took everything and the kitchen sink to not simply throw protocols out the window. And that laugh? That was the final straw! He was *done*! The king and Ryuko weren't on this crazy and messed-up world. They were probably on some normal world. Like Lindblum or Alexandria. Where he thought they should go until Goofy and Sora convinced him otherwise.

"If anyone needs me, I'll be waiting in the Gummi Ship!"

"However..."

Precariously balancing himself atop his own head, literally and figuratively, the Cheshire Cat loudly guffawed. He lightly chortled. And he eagerly chuckled. He was positively thrilled by the mage's temper. Or lack thereof. And yet, grabbing his head and placing it once more upon his shoulders with no discernible consequence, he wistfully huffed, "If I *were* looking for a White Rabbit, I'd start with the queen. Found over yonder. Through the forest and over the chessboard. Pay no heed to the Red and White Queens, for court is now in session. And today's guest, I'm afraid to say, happens to be in quite the terrible predicament."

Sora's heart nearly leapt up his throat, "Someone's in trouble?"

"Oh no you don't!"

Donald sensed it coming from a mile away. He knew what Sora was going to say. He knew that look. It spelled trouble. For all of them. Especially him. *Particularly* him, "No interfering with other worlds! For all we know, this 'guest' broke the law! Maybe they're guilty! Or maybe this stupid cat is completely insane!"

"Insanity is in the ~eye~ of the beholder."

The process started with the very tip of the Cheshire Cat's swishing tail.

Almost like a ball of yarn unraveling itself across the floor, or someone pulling upon the single loose thread on a sweater, slowly but surely, without either haste or celerity, the Cheshire Cat faded from sight. First the purple stripes. Then the pink. Its back paws. Then its front. Shoulders and hips and chest and stomach followed suit. Until the only thing remaining, both its namesake and personification, was a grinning mouth of teeth. And mischievous, unhinged laughter ringing in their ears.

"Hmmm... hmmm... hahahaha! And the mome raths outgrabe!"

"Gosh..."

Goofy scratched his forehead, "What an odd fella."

"Yeah, he was a little strange."

That was the understatement of the century. Sora knew it. And he knew Goofy and Donald knew it. When it came to weirdness, the Cheshire Cat took the cake. Well, only if you don't count Mrs. Mankanshoku. Nothing in the universe, not talking cats or sleeping doorknobs or even the Heartless, could compare to Mako, "But so

what? There are lots of strange things out there. Besides, he *did* tell us which way the rabbit went."

Donald couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Don't tell me you believe him!"

Sora shrugged, then folded both hands against the back of his neck, "Why would he lie?"

"Because he's nuts!"

The declaration went straight over Sora's head. Sure, he heard Donald talking, but it didn't matter. Maybe Kairi and Riku weren't somewhere in this world. Maybe he should have taken Donald's advice and gone straight to Lindblum or Alexandria. But it was too late to change anything. His mind was settled. His heart made up. They were going to save whoever needed rescuing, "Well, *I* believe him! Someone needs our help! I'm not going to let some stupid rules stop me from doing what's right!"

Goofy and Donald watched, the latter outraged and the former bewildered, Sora sprint head-first into danger. All without the slightest concern for his safety. The kid rushed through the door previously hidden behind the bed, Keyblade manifesting in a shower of golden light and determination burning in his eyes. And after a brief moment to collect his thoughts, not to mention scratch his nose, Goofy addressed the elephant in the room.

"Ya know, that's something Master Ryuko would say."

Donald resisted the urge to smack his friend upside the head, "Don't remind me. Let's go before Sora gets himself into trouble."

The Cheshire Cat

Unknown Report 11

Unknown Report 11

[Days passed with every heartbeat.](#)

Months vanished into the endless mists of time as she roamed the infinite darkness.

Exhaustion nipped at her weary heart yet never grew beyond a cold bitterness.

The taste of food was nothing more than scattered memories.

In such a hellish and nightmarish realm, time possessed little significance.

Stagnation defined her self-inflicted prison.

Every moment was filled with shadows whispering against her heart. The darkness mocked her powerlessness to save those she cherished. They mocked her greatest failures. When her guard was lowered, she observed glimpses of the past, twisted and contorted by the hellish realm. Ven losing his heart and falling into eternal slumber. Terra succumbing to Xehanort's darkness and becoming a prisoner in his own body. Master Eraqus sacrificing himself against the Cloud of Darkness. Ardyn Izunia damaging Ryuko's heart enough that Master Yen Sid didn't know when she'd wake up.

The savage bitterness seeped into her bones.

Goosebumps raced down her arms.

Yet despite the slow lengthening of her shadow, unable to tell the difference between reality and twisted manifestations of her nightmares and memories, Aqua desperately grasped onto the small hope of one day returning to the realm of light. There had to be a

way out of the darkness. And once she stepped back into the light, she'd unlock the Realm of Departure and wake up Ven. She would free Terra from Xehanort's influence once and for all. She'd make the treacherous master suffer the consequences of toying with their hearts. And if there was anyone who could recover from the immense damage done to her heart, it would be Ryuko.

Maybe she was lucky and Ryuko already saved Terra.

But if that was the case, how long had she been meandering through the darkness?

Weeks?

Months?

Years?

There was always a way home. Even in the deepest shadows, where Heartless feared to tread, light nevertheless existed. A flickering candle in the darkness. As long as she cupped her hands around that faintest sliver of hope... as long as she remembered her friends... their hearts would eventually lead her home. But how long would such a journey take? Time did not exist in the realm of darkness. Decades might pass. Perhaps longer. By the time she escaped, everyone she cared about might have died. And the thought of continuing this stagnating existence - never growing old or hungry or tired - only to realize everyone she loved and cherished, Terra, Ven, Ryuko and those she met across the realm of light, had passed beyond the mortal plane, tortured her mind.

Would she ever escape?

Or would she forever be trapped in this hellish realm until darkness consumed the last vestiges of light in her heart?

"Huh?"

So lost within her own heart, unable to focus on anything other than keeping the bitter darkness at bay, she'd missed the rocky landscape underneath her feet transition into asphalt. Once pristine lanes lay cracked and warped. Large chunks were missing. Parts were nothing more than rubble or having long collapsed into the surrounding abyss. In the distance, the unknown road bucked, rising high into the darkness in taunting mockeries of canyons and cliffsides.

Unable to believe her own eyes, Aqua knelt onto the ground. She dragged her fingers along the asphalt, feeling every bump and crack. She pressed the palm of her hand felt against the surface, embracing the coolness seeping into her skin. This was *real*. The road wasn't another trick of the darkness. This wasn't another twisted manifestation of long-forgotten nightmares and faded memories.

"It can't be..."

The mysterious road vanished into the darkness, until it was nothing more than a mirage on the horizon.

And without hesitation, she leapt onto her feet and rushed forward.

Every step ground her closer to the answer. Every writhing shadow and twitching puddle of darkness reduced to purple dust at the hands of her - no, Master Eraqus's - Keyblade cleared the path. For what felt like the first time in ages, hope sprang eternal inside her heart. She leapt from plateau to plateau. She skated along winding steel barriers twisted by darkness. She leapfrogged along floating platforms. She nearly lost her balance as asphalt crumpled underneath her feet. More than once, the massive Heartless, towering almost one hundred feet into the air, stood in her path.

"Tch!"

Dust and darkness clung to her clothes as she leapt across the chasm.

Clawed fingers reached out of the abyss leading to the very heart of darkness. Heartless, more than she could count, sought to extinguish her light. An infinite amount, easily numbering in the thousands or millions, formed an ocean of shadows punctuated by pinpoints of glowing yellow. But she didn't give up. She persevered. And upon landing on the other side of the chasm, rolling shoulder over shoulder before coming to a less than graceful stop, her eyes widened at the freshly-cut grass inches away from her face.

"What is this place?"

A ruined city lay silhouetted against the twisting purple and maroon darkness casting pale twilight across the nightmarish realm. Empty buildings, windows broken or cracked, stretched before her eyes. Holding one hand over her heart, head tilted downwards to avoid gazing upon the abandoned children's playground where she landed, Aqua couldn't find the energy to do anything more than faintly whisper.

"Such sadness..."

Grass crunched beneath her boots as she proceeded forward. Swings held aloft by metal chains and plastic ropes, colored red, yellow and blue, rustled in an ephemeral wind. Sandboxes and slides, ancient whispers of children playing while their parents watched from nearby benches, stung her heart in ways the darkness couldn't. At one point, this playground had been full of laughter. Families came to this place to relax and enjoy themselves. To meet with friends and neighbors. Yet now nothing remained by loneliness and long forgotten memories.

Guilt. Melancholy. Powerlessness.

Emotions spiraled within the turbulent depths of her heart, sapping what little warmth remained.

"The Heartless didn't spare anyone... not even children."

Unable to withstand the torment of what might have happened in their final moments, Aqua took one final look around the park, one hand curled over her heart, before trudging through the broken gates, each step reverberating heavily against the oppressive silence.

Neither purpose nor motivation guided her heart.

She simply continued walking.

Time didn't exist in the realm of darkness. No matter how long she walked, or how many buildings she passed, Aqua couldn't tell one second from another. This place... this abandoned city lost to the darkness... was nothing more than another painful reminder of the Heartless. The creatures born of the darkness spared nobody. How many innocent lives had been stolen by the Heartless? Thousands? Millions? The thought of such devastation chilled her already numbed heart. Holding onto the faintest hope of reuniting with Ven, Terra and Ryuko, Aqua folded her arms together, exhaled, a faint mist passing through her teeth, and kept moving.

Why was she even trying?

Perhaps she should just give up and -

A house drew her attention.

Stopping in the middle of the street, Aqua turned around, arms falling to her sides. She couldn't explain how or why, but something about the dwelling reached out her heart. It whispered words she could barely hear, let alone comprehend. It felt... familiar. But that wasn't possible. She'd never seen this house. She'd never stepped foot in this city. And yet, despite having no memory of approaching the front door, Aqua suddenly found herself standing upon the precipice of the once warm abode, fingers gently sliding away from the doorknob.

"Nobody's home..."

She hadn't expected anyone.

But the knowledge of the emptiness gnawed at her heart.

"Just... another sign of the darkness..."

Whispering under her breath, lips barely moving despite the heavy beating of her heart, Aqua turned to leave. Her hand returned to the doorknob. Yet before closing the door, something hanging on the wall across from the closet, where a rain-soaked bag laid forgotten in the corner, caught her attention. It was a framed picture. But not just any picture. Dulled blue eyes widened. A sharp gasp escaped her throat. A tremor pulled against her bottom lip. Her mouth became as dry as sandpaper. And with the sensation of her heart rising into the back of her throat, she pulled the photograph off the wall.

It was Ryuko.

And not just Ryuko.

The location didn't seem familiar. A street or nearby neighborhood. But Ryuko was standing around Satsuki and another girl. One wearing pink with bowl-cut brown hair and a strange backpack. Satsuki was bushing from what looked like modest embarrassment. Yet it was Ryuko and the other girl's wide smiles, stretching from ear to ear, which caused the photograph to nearly slip from her numb fingers.

"This was... Ryuko's home?"

They hadn't known Ryuko for more than a few weeks, but she'd been tightlipped about her world. Apart from Satsuki and Mako, people Ryuko swore she would dive into the darkness itself to protect, she didn't mention anyone else. Not even her parents. Yet the Ryuko in the picture looked so *happy*. Like she didn't have a care in the world. An entirely different person grinned back at her. Someone without the weight of losing everything she cherished

pulled Satsuki into a one-armed hug. A teenager without responsibility gave the peace sign towards the camera.

How long before Xehanort and Vanitas destroyed Ryuko's world had this picture been taken?

Days?

Weeks?

Just thinking about the answer pulled at her heartstrings.

"Ryuko lived in darkness for so long..."

Aqua traced a finger along the picture's frame.

"... yet she never gave up hope. Even when things looked grim, her heart remained strong."

She delicately removed the picture of Ryuko, Satsuki and Mako from the plastic purple frame decorated with hearts and animals.

Renewed hope sprang inside her heart. A smile pulled upon the corners of her lips. For the first time in recent memory, she breathed easily, unburdened by guilt and melancholy. Careful not to fold the photograph, she tucked it away inside her halter top. Right beneath the wayfinder dangling from her neck.

"Terra. Ven. Ryuko. I'll find a way out of the darkness..."

Her footsteps echoed with uncharacteristic lightness as she walked further into the realm of darkness.

"Just wait a little longer."

The Photograph

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Last edited: Mar 13, 2019

Chapter 11.6

And so ends Wonderland and Chapter 11. I think incorporating standard boss fights into storytelling is, at the same time, both difficult and worthwhile. There's not much more I can say other than I hope you enjoy it.

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/9/98/Bizarre_Room_%28Art%29_01.png]

"Hah... hah..."

With a swish and a slash, mystical metal sliced through the twitching shadows sneaking along the floor. Taking a single step before vaulting upwards, Keyblade grasped with both hands and teeth tightly clenched together, Sora deflected the searing orbs of fire. In that same motion, he slashed through the floating imp-like Heartless twirling through the air before any of their attacks could singe his favorite jacket. Upon landing back on the ground, he immediately backslid around a pair of clawed gauntlets. Black smoke and dissolving darkness obscured his vision as he stepped onto the arm of a particularly fat Heartless, leapt over its head, swung the Keyblade between his legs and sent it barreling straight into the wall.

"ALICE!!!"

More sweat trickled down his face than the day Tidus's dad said he and Riku were ready for *real* training. Which had involved getting their butts handed to them until they couldn't even stand. Lowering the Keyblade as each and every Heartless within range vanished into darkness, leaving behind dozens of glowing hearts spiraling towards the ceiling, Sora pivoted back and forth.

"WHERE ARE YOU!?"

Out of breath, both from fighting Heartless and shouting, fear rocked Sora's heart. This couldn't be right! The Cheshire Cat said the 'shadows took Alice where big and small made little difference.' It had to be this room! But no matter where he looked, there was no sign of Alice, "Where is she?"

"Slow down!"

After more than half an hour of running back and forth through the Lotus Forest, getting ambushed by Heartless left and right, cheering up a depressed turtle and dealing with whatever a Jabberwocky was, Donald's legendarily short temper was a rapidly unraveling thread. He couldn't contain his intensifying irritation. In short order, upon running into the bizarre room and seeing an army of Heartless waiting for them, he raised his staff, squawked a single declaration and summoned a miniature thunderstorm powerful enough to transform the monsters into dust.

While also avoiding Sora, who had thrown himself into battle against the Heartless without the slightest concern for his own safety.

"We don't even know if she's here!"

The mage's patience finally *snapped* when Sora refused to pay attention, "That stupid cat was probably messing with us! Ever since we stepped foot on this crazy world, that flea-bitten feline's been nothing but trouble!"

"Aw, c'mon, Donald!"

Sora spun around, shrugging childishly with Keyblade in hand, "The Cheshire Cat's not *that* bad!"

"Have you forgotten about the Jabberwocky!?"

The image was seared into his mind. A horrendous, nightmarish and ugly monster. It hadn't been particularly powerful. No more so than the Heartless in Traverse Town. And certainly nothing Ryuko could

have demolished without the Keyblade. But the Jabberwocky was immortal. Everything they threw at it, including magic and the Keyblade, did little but slow the darn monster down. Sora slicing off its head only worked for a few seconds. Right before blood and sinew stitched back together, only much *angrier*.

And with more lightning.

"That screwy cat almost killed us!"

It had been bad enough getting tricked into going the wrong way in a topsy-turvy world. Especially when the bad directions involved facing an immortal monster completely unrelated to the Heartless. But hearing that insane feline's laughter while the Jabberwocky was chasing them halfway across Wonderland? Oh, the next time he saw that stupid cat, it would regret everything, "And we don't even know if Alice is here!"

"But that doesn't mean she *isn't* in trouble!"

On the verge of falling onto his butt and taking a much-needed rest, Sora examined the table legs. Since dealing with those strange card soldiers, they'd been running nonstop throughout Wonderland looking for Alice. Goofy led the way through the Lotus Forest. Donald helped him cheer up the Mock Turtle. Against all odds, they escaped the Jabberwocky's with minor scrapes and bruises. But they were getting close. He could feel it. He couldn't how or why. It was nothing more than a feeling. A familiar warmth growing stronger by the second. Alice *had* been here.

He just knew it.

"What if the Heartless already stole her heart?"

Spinning around on his back foot, he motioned desperately with the Keyblade, "Or something even worse?"

"Ya gotta stay positive, Sora!"

Taking a quick peek at the talking tulip next to the doorknob, which wanted another potion despite Sora having already handed one over, Goofy raised a finger into the air, "The Cheshire Cat didn't actually say the Heartless still had Alice, right? Maybe she escaped when nobody was lookin'."

"Maybe..."

What Goofy said *sounded* right. Sora could admit that much to himself. And the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. The Cheshire Cat had talked about shadows running off with Alice. But nothing about Alice still being in trouble. Did that mean she escaped the Heartless? Was she hiding somewhere nearby, too afraid to come out? He didn't know. But staring at the Keyblade, he tried listening to his heart. Just like Ryuko always said to do. When things got tough, when the light seemed distant, trust in your heart and everything would soon fall into place.

"But that doesn't mean we should give up!"

None of them, Sora included, were particularly surprised when off-balanced laughter spontaneously manifested atop the table in the middle of the room.

"Hmmm... hmmm... hahahaha!"

Bouncing his disembodied head from one paw to the other, yellow eyes swiveling back and forth like pendulums of a grandfather clock, the Cheshire Cat absconded with more than his fair share of unbridled amusement when the enraged mage's fireballs achieved absolutely nothing. Except, of course, to loosen a few cramped muscles between his third and fourth pair of legs, "Oh, do forgive me, I seem to have lost my head. But in the mirror, everything's backwards and forwards. Left is right and up is down. The roundabout path through the tulgey wood is the shortest. While the well-traveled shortcut across the wabe? Well..."

A quick *plop* replaced the grinning appendage between his shoulders, only facing the wrong direction, "... you start feeling lightheaded... hahahaha!"

Donald's eyebrow twitched.

"I'm going to burn the smirk right off your face!"

Another burst of maniac laughter, followed by a guttural intake of air, accompanied the Cheshire Cat rolling onto his stomach.

"Why is a raven like a writing-desk?"

Still grinning in the slightly off-kilter fashion which sent the half-dressed court wizard through a tizzy, the obtuse purple and pink striped feline focused on Sora, "Answer or not, you'll get no further advice from me! Although your ~performance~ with the Mock Turtle was a little flat!"

"Where's Alice?"

Sora stared at the mysterious cat, heart beating a mile a minute and cold realization slowly trickling down his spine, "You said the Heartless took Alice where big and small didn't make any difference!"

"Oh, don't ~you~ worry!"

The feline's head tilted to the right, and then kept going, until it rotated completely, "The shadows should be arriving any moment. Which, by the way, begs the question..."

Slowly but surely, parts of the Cheshire Cat faded into the background. First one leg and then the other. Followed by its right forearm. Then its left, "Are you ready?"

"Yeah!"

He was still a little nervous. Despite trying to keep his cool, Sora heard his voice briefly crack. Even after fighting more Heartless than

he could remember, it was still *fighting*. Life and death. A single mistake meant losing his heart. It meant not finding Riku or Kairi or his mom and dad, "I don't care what you throw at us! We're going to save Alice!"

"The frumious Bandersnatch rolls around the Tumtum trees! And I, if you must know, do the same!"

Now dancing atop the bottles labeled 'DRINK ME' as nothing more than a disembodied head, the enigmatic cat silently clapped at the boy's lack of hesitation in the face of overwhelming and quite deadly odds. And, as custom, the rest of his body faded into the nothingness resting between two pages, leaving behind a grinning mouth of pearl-white teeth, "Well, the worst is worst! And what's worse than juggling fire? Why, it's this and that, of course!"

BOOM!!!

The room quaked, from the upside-down glass lanterns on the ceiling to the books on the corner table, when an enormous and bizarre-looking Heartless smashed through the table.

"What the -?"

Sora slowly backpedaled away from the towering monster. His eyes widened. His jaw dropped. A mixture of awe and fear sank into his heart.

Compared to the other Heartless he, Donald and Goofy had fought throughout Wonderland and Traverse Town, this one was different. Way different. Something about the way it looked didn't seem *right*. Its spindly legs split apart at the waist, making it wobble with every step. It had long arms resembling the decorations hanging on the walls during Kairi's last birthday party. Clawed fingers tossed a pair of weird batons into the air. Its head was several faces stacked on top of each other.

And they were all looking straight at him.

"Alright!"

Holding the Keyblade tightly in both hands, eyebrows furrowing into a frown, he wiped away the fear in his heart. Sure, this Heartless looked powerful. And maybe it was as strong as it looked. But next to the Jabberwocky, which had breathed lightning and sent gusts of razor-sharp wind with every flap of its wings, they were more than ready to win!

"Let's kick this thing's butt!"

WHAM!!!

As if on cue, the Heartless darted forward, batons smashed against the ground.

With one eye constantly looking over his shoulder and the Keyblade pumping back and forth alongside his arm, Sora sprinted in a long and winding path around the room. His sneakers squeaked against the floor. Sweat poured down his face. A shadow loomed overhead as the Heartless turned around, multiple faces and glowing yellow eyes swiveling towards a single point of interest and burst into motion.

"I guess... I'm the... bait... huh?"

Another smash of its batons knocked him off his feet. The concussive impacts sent him flying into the air. His eyes widened. But flipping forward, propping one hand on the floor, Sora immediately regained his balance. Pivoting sharply on his back foot, necklace swinging and jacket rustling from the abrupt movement, he clasped the Keyblade. His knuckles bled white from the pressure. He gnashed his teeth. This was going to suck. But it was also perfect. If the Heartless were drawn to the Keyblade, that meant this monster wouldn't pay any attention to Donald or Goofy until he was out of the picture.

And that was their chance!

WHAM!!!

"Raghhhh... !"

It felt like blocking one of Jecht's 'love taps.' Or maybe a little worse. His arms trembled. His teeth clattered. He could feel himself sliding backwards along the floor. But he refused to give up. Not when everyone was counting him to win. If he failed, Alice would be lost to the darkness. She'd never return to her family.

"Like this..."

Further tightening his grip around the Keyblade, he slowed, then slowed, the Heartless's advance.

"... is going to..."

He took one step forward. And then another. All while the Keyblade spun counterclockwise alongside an arc of scintillating light.

"... stop me!!!"

And with one final, overwhelming *push*, Sora sent the Heartless stumbling backwards.

"GOOFY!!! NOW!!!"

Straight into Goofy's shield.

Like an unstoppable battering ram powered by sheer muscle mass, the captain of the royal knights barreled through two of the massive Heartless's legs. The impact immediately caused the creature to spin sideways. Ineffectively attempting to regain its balance, it staggered across the room. Batons waving drunkenly in its claws. And waiting until the monster smashed into the wall, sending several large books falling onto its head one after another, Donald raised his wooden

staff, took aim, spoke a single declarative command and fired an impressive ball of orange-yellow flames.

Which did nothing but set the Heartless's batons aflame.

"I've got this!"

If fire made everything worse, *a lot* worse, that left only one option. Running in a wide circle around the Heartless, leaping awkwardly when the burning batons furiously crashed against the ground over and over again, releasing waves of rippling flames across the floor, Sora pivoted, clashed the Keyblade with both hands, locked his elbows and shouted at the top of his lungs.

"DEEP FREEZE!!!"

He hadn't expected much. The Keyblade was powerful. But magic? *His* magic? Well, compared to Donald, the best he hoped to do was extinguish the flames. Maybe slow the Heartless down long enough for him and Goofy to whack it a few times.

But *this*?

"Whoa..."

The Keyblade nearly fell from his fingers. In the blink of an eye, the Heartless had been flash-frozen inside a glacier so thick he couldn't see through it. The ice appeared so quickly that both of its batons had been caught mid-juggle. One in its claws and the other so far away that ice had streamed upwards, curving and twisting in spiraling patterns. Behind the crackling and bitter-cold ice, which caused his breath to emerge as pale wisps, stacked pairs of glowing eyes stared emptily at the spot Donald and Goofy had been standing at the exact moment everything went sideways.

Caught off guard by the powerful magic, he looked at the mystical weapon in his fingers, then at the Heartless, then back at the Keyblade before softly whistling.

"... did I do that?"

His eyes widening at the surprising display of modern art, Goofy peeked over the slightly dented and burnt shield, "Gawrsh, Sora! You're a natural!"

"Sora didn't do *that*!"

Donald motioned towards the newly-formed glacier, "If he did, he'd be laying on the ground!"

"Really?"

The captain of the royal knights scratched his temple, "You sayin' someone else stopped the Heartless?"

"Well, so what? They helped us, right?"

A relieved smirk stretched across Sora's face. The exact opposite expression to Donald's suspicious glower, "That means whoever they are, they're on our side! Maybe they know where the Heartless took Alice!"

"Topsy-turvy, upside-down."

"I wonder where you're going now..."

The sing-song voice came from everywhere and nowhere.

"Huh?"

Sora couldn't tell who was speaking. Or where the strange voice was coming from. It came from the doorknob. It echoed off the ceiling. At first, he thought the Cheshire Cat could alter its voice. But that didn't make sense. Not even for a wierld place like Wonderland, where tulips talked and playing cards shuffled themselves. Spinning around, eyes swiveling back and forth, he closed ranks with Donald and Goofy. Then, as if something connected with his heart, he glanced towards the window high on the wall.

And his mouth fell open in a gasp.

Someone was sitting on the windowsill in front of the fancy-looking window. And not just anyone. Or a random stranger. It was the woman in the pink coat. The same one he saw back in Traverse Town. Even from the ground, far enough away that the sunlight streaming through the window made him slightly wince, he could see her friendly smile. Her hood might've covered most of her face, but she was leaning forward, legs swinging back and forth, mouth stretched in a wide and somewhat disarming grin.

"It's you again!"

Faster than a whip, Donald's head snapped towards Sora, "You know her?"

"Well... no, not really," Sora sheepishly confessed, "I have no idea who she is. But she showed up after we defeated that Heartless back in Traverse Town."

"What are you talking about?"

The wizard's eyes swiveled towards the woman while the rest of his body remained perfectly still, "I didn't see anyone!"

"Dunno why, but she ran away right after showing up."

Folding his arms against the back of his neck, Keyblade vanishing alongside showers of golden light, Sora grumbled in the back of his throat. This was a relief. For a while, he believed his conversation, if it could be called that, with the woman in Traverse Town was nothing more than a figment of his imagination. Especially after Goofy didn't see anything. But at the same time, something felt off. He couldn't explain how or why. But the woman's friendly smile, which looked *really* friendly, seemed unnerving.

"But she's gotta be friendly!"

And just like that, he made up his mind. What if the woman looked a little strange? There were lots of weird and funny-looking people. Not to mention moogles, moombas and whatever other things existed on worlds nobody's ever visited, "I mean, she did take care of that Heartless for us."

"Maybe she's friends with the king."

Goofy offered his own two-cents on the matter, "But ya know, that pink coat is awfully strange lookin'."

"You're telling me!"

Donald had a bad feeling. A really *bad* feeling in the pit of his stomach. Something about this woman rubbed him the wrong way. Not as bad as the Cheshire Cat purposely giving them directions straight to the Jabberwocky. But a close second. And gaining ground every second he saw her unnervingly wide smile, "What if she's only pretending to be helpful? Like that stupid cat?"

"Aw, come on!"

Sora knew why Donald was still a little bummed. Well, a lot bummed. Truth be told, he felt the same way. The Jabberwocky hadn't been the most pleasant creature. How do you fight something that's pretty much immortal? And yet, whining childishly, he shrugged off the complaint, "You've been suspicious of everything since we got here!"

"One, two! One, two!

Back and forth and through and through.

The scissor blades went snicker-snack.

She left her dead, and with no more said,

went once more galumphing back."

"Scissor Blades?"

That the woman was wagging her finger, the metronomic motion unnerving considering the rest of her body wasn't moving, went over Sora's head. And almost by instinct, the Keyblade reappeared in his hand, "How do you know Ryuko?"

["Master Ryuko?"](#)

Goofy slowly repeated the question, shared a confused look with Donald, and then glanced back towards the mysterious woman perched near the top of the room, "Are ya sure? We've never seen her before."

Instead of answering their questions, or doing anything helpful, the woman's movements ground to a halt. Her feet stopped swinging. She clapped both hands onto her knees. Her already friendly smile widened, causing a chill to race down Donald's spine. And leaning forward at an awkward angle, seemingly on the verge of falling off the windowsill, her singsong voice contained an underlying sense of mocking amusement, "Golly! Is that a Keyblade? Can ~I~ see?"

Sora didn't know why, but something about the woman's interest caused him to hide the magical weapon behind his leg, "How do you know about the Keyblade?"

"Hmm... that's my little secret!"

A giggle pressed against his heart when the woman leaned forward, propped her chin on the palm of her gloved hand and once more began swinging her legs, "But gosh, you're nothing more than a *débutant*! Do you have the ~slightest~ clue how the Keyblade *really* works?"

"*Débutant*?"

The captain of the royal knights mulled over the strange-sounded word. It sounded familiar. Almost like that language on the world he, Donald and the king learned how to be good and proper musketeers, "Uh... that means to 'start,' right?"

"Oh dear!"

It was brief. Lasting no longer than the time between heartbeats. But the woman was mildly surprised by Goofy's knowledge of her native tongue, "That's ~really~ close! But there's no prize for second place!"

"Don't fall for her tricks!"

With an irritated grumble and equally annoyed mutter, Donald grabbed his hat and *pushed* it down his forehead. He couldn't give two tail feathers about the woman's reasons for being on this strange world! Or how she knew Ryuko! He might not be the smartest duck, but if there was one lesson Uncle Scrooge taught him, it was to always trust your heart. Instinct and intuition were the cornerstones of any adventurer's survival! Far more important than fearlessness and bravery! And right now, his heart was shouting louder than any orchestra that this woman was *dangerous*.

"She's obviously up to no good!"

Sora turned to Donald, nodded and slowly, almost hesitatingly despite all evidence to the contrary, raised the Keyblade, "So... I guess this means we've got to fight her?"

"Oh, don't be like that! Didn't you see? I totally froze that Heartless just now!"

A mysterious warmth enveloped Sora's heart. The Keyblade lowered. The tension in his muscles vanished. It didn't exactly make sense, but he could sense something *familiar* about the woman.

"But enough about me! Let's talk about *you*!"

Propping her chin onto both hands, legs swinging back and forth, head bobbing side to side, all independently of each other, the woman's smile was downright disarming, "What brings someone fun and exciting like you to a boring and predictable world like this?"

"Well, we're looking -"

Two pairs of hands suddenly clamped over Sora's mouth.

"It's important business!"

Donald squawked harshly enough that his voice was crystal clear. Sometimes he couldn't believe the Keyblade chose someone so naïve. Who in all the worlds would randomly spill his guts to some strange, mysterious and most likely antagonistic woman? Not even Ryuko would do something that stupid, "None of *your* business!"

A tuft of blonde hair, twisting around itself, poked the edges of the woman's hood as she tucked one leg against her chest and *grinned*.

"The darkness crawls and scampers,

Summoned forth by the mean old fairy.

But on that exciting and fabulous day,

It was the Scissor Blade she couldn't parry."

It happened so quickly. One moment she was sitting on the edge of the windowsill, one foot still swinging back and forth. And the next, before he could blink, the woman was standing up, both hands folded against the small of her back, "The mean old fairy is messing around with stuff normal people never should! Taboo stuff! ~Naughty~ stuff!"

Sora's eyes widened when the woman was suddenly leaning forward, fingers woven together in front of her face, "She's why that cute little princess is nowhere to be found! While you were dealing with that deck of cards, the Heartless swooped in and snatched her!"

"They did?"

As hard as he tried, Goofy couldn't make heads or tails of the mysterious woman's strange riddle, "If ya saw the Heartless take

Alice, why didn't ya stop them?"

"Because, you silly little puppy, it wasn't ~my~ problem!"

The woman's trilling laughter possessed underlying sadism and mockery. It grated against their hearts. For a moment, Sora could also imagine something dark. But the strange sensation ended as soon as it began. Her hands, now unfolded, separated. One fell towards her waist. The other rubbed her chin. She leaned forward despite the precarious positioning of her pink boots over the windowsill's edge. A certain 'stiffness' manifested in her movements. And cocking her head slightly to the right, just enough for her posture to seem incredibly awkward and unnerving, her grin minutely widened, "It's all your fault, you know. If you ~really~ cared about that princess, you would have deflated that rotund queen instead of fooling around."

She tutted, wagging her finger as if scolding a child, "But nope! *You* had to play by the rules. And now poor Alice is gone. Lost to the darkness. And nowhere to be found."

"HEY!!!"

A trace of spittle flew from Sora's mouth as he shouted at the woman looking down at them from her perch, "What kind of person doesn't care about Heartless stealing an innocent girl's heart?"

"Oh phooey, you hero types are all the same!"

Bending sideways at an awkward angle, hands clasped together against the small of her back, the woman huffed in a manner befitting a child, "'Don't kill her!' 'Don't hurt him!' 'Please don't, I have children!' Pa~lease, why should I care about something so gosh darn boring?"

Sora was shocked. He couldn't say anything. Hearing the woman speak so *normally* about watching people lose their hearts struck him speechless. But then she pouted. Tilting her head slightly to the

right, her cheeks puffed outwards. And for a split second, he caught a glimpse of familiar blue eyes.

"Darkness and light are nothing but two sides of the same coin!"

Now pointing at his heart, the woman giggled, the titillating laughter trickling down their spines, "The sooner your bleeding heart learns to accept that, the better!"

"Get back, Sora!"

Magic crackled around Donald's knotted wooden staff. Motes of fire and shards of ice mixed with wind and water. At the court wizard's side, standing in front of Sora with his shield held aloft, Goofy wore an uncharacteristically serious expression. One matched by the intense coldness lurking with his own eyes, ""Who are you!? Start talking or I'm going to hit you with a million volts!"

"Sorry! Nope! Can't do that!"

The woman was unbothered by the intense magic gathered around the short-tempered mage's staff. Even as more and more power manifested alongside a glowing bluish sigil, she spun sideways, kicked one foot against the back of her thigh, clasped both hands together and mockingly pouted.

"You're threatening me with magic, huh? Not taking any chances? Hmm... I suppose that could work. If you were a ~real~ sorcerer!"

She laughed. The sound of her mocking trilling screeched against their hearts like nails on a chalkboard. In the span of a single moment, an overwhelming *malice* filled the room. Both the sunlight and surrounding ambience darkened. A thick and writhing darkness, tinted shades of purple and crimson, fluttered around the woman, causing her widening smile to become downright malicious, "Which means your threats are nothing more than last year's autumn designs. Outdated. Outmatched. Outclassed. And outplayed."

"Why you... THUNDAJA!!!"

KA-BOOM!!!

The explosion almost knocked Sora backwards. He could feel his ears ringing. Every hair on his body was standing on end. In the blink of an eye and flash of light, he understood why Donald hadn't appreciated him begging to learn magic. *And* why Ryuko and Yuna never once demonstrated anything larger than small flames. Not even when he or Riku or Kairi wanted to see something truly amazing. Because the lightning exploding from Donald's staff was on an entirely different level. It went far beyond the thunderstorm which kept the Jabberwocky at bay while they escaped. And the inferno that softened the Heartless back in Traverse Town for him and Goofy to take down.

CRACK-BOOM!!!

A second blast forced him off his feet.

Blue white-electricity, arcing and crackling with more intensity and brilliance than a raging maelstrom in the midst of a tumultuous hurricane, crossed the appreciable distance between the woman and Donald's staff at little over one-third the speed of light. The accompanying concussive blast violently shattered the sound barrier into millions of pieces. The full-powered Thundaja drained almost every ounce of magic in the court wizard's feathers. Simply casting the powerful spell caused spots to dance in front of Donald's narrowed and furious eyes.

And in return for such consequential power, lightning exploded against the window. Shattered glass and pulverized wood rained downwards alongside burning embers and the smell of ozone. Thick greyish clouds clung to the air like smoke, filling their lungs with putrid odors and smells.

"What the -"

Donald balked. His beak fell open. Then snapped shut. As pretty much expected, the Thundaja had smashed straight through the window without slowing down, creating a jagged hole letting in sunlight. But not a single trace of the woman could be found. Not even shredded remains of her pink coat, "Where did she go!?"

"Are ya sure you didn't vaporize her?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

He thought about Goofy's question and then promptly brushed it aside. Something about the woman wasn't right. Nobody was stupid enough to stand in front of a full-powered Thundaja without a fool-proof plan. Not the Black Mage Lulu. Not Master Yen Sid. Not even Ryuko was that foolish. This woman, whoever she was, wasn't any different. And that scared him a lot more than any unnerving behavior or overly friendly smile.

"Humph!"

Adjusting the lopsided hat sitting awkwardly halfway down his forehead, Donald snorted at the reintroduced emptiness in the room, "She must've been scared away! Serves her right!"

For all his bravado and courage, he didn't believe the woman actually retreated after one measly Thundaja. Not for a moment. Not when he didn't have enough energy left to cast another one. She'd been strong. *Too* strong. The Heartless frozen inside a block of thick ice like an interior decoration was proof she hadn't been all talk. Yet she wasn't around anymore. Which was good enough for him, "Let's keep moving! The sooner we find Alice, the better!"

"What about the Heartless?"

Conflicted between continuing to look for Alice and finishing off the giant Heartless before it escaped and harmed anyone else, Sora waved the Keyblade over his shoulder, "What if it escapes?"

"Gawrsh, I don't know, Sora. It looks pretty frozen to me."

"Yeah, but stuff like this always goes screwy when you stop paying attention," Sora knew Goofy was probably right. The Heartless didn't look like it was escaping that thick glacier any time soon. But from Ryuko and Auron's stories, things always went pear-shaped when people started believing things were fine and dandy, "We should finish it off first! Before it breaks free and transforms into its stronger, final form!"

Donald honestly didn't know what to say.

The beginnings of a migraine manifested. A pain not even the most powerful restoration magic could alleviate. Taking a deep breath and doing his best not to grab the top of his beak and grumble, Donald rolled his eyes at Sora's overbearing smile, "Alright! Fine! Finish off that Heartless!"

"Are ya feelin' alright, Donald?"

Muttering in the back of his throat at Goofy's concern while Sora ran forward, Keyblade held overhead with both hands, Donald facepalmed, "It's going to be a *long* journey..."

Chapter 12.1

You know, despite using Gilgamesh quite a bit, I never wrote a fight involving him on a bridge. Which is his namesake Sure, he encountered Aqua in Enchanted Dominion on the bridge outside the castle. But not an actual battle. Then again, there really aren't that many bridges in Kingdom Hearts. The only other major bridge that comes to mind (besides that one) is the bridge of light Sora creates using his Keyblade to connect the Brink of Despair with the Castle That Never Was. And the Grid. But I don't think he would bother going into such a strange place.

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/0/00/ED1_GnIjI20.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140717081357]

"ZZZ... ZZZ... ZZZ..."

The storage room lacked anything resembling modern comfort. The relentless passage of time had worn away what meager colors once graced its walls. Flecks of dried mud splintered from every visible surface. Cracks covered the walls and ceiling like veins, exposing long-since-chiseled sandstone blocks. Through the Moorish window carved into the western-facing wall, the sun burned high in the heavens, casting alternating beams of light and shadows across the dusty floor.

"ZZZ... ZZZ... ZZZ..."

On the other side of the window, descending past clotheslines, rotten wooden planks and horizontal poles, people lingered in the streets. Merchants hoked discounts about their 'famous wares.' Concerned families quickened their paces. Burly guards wearing brass-like armor and wielding sharp scimitars patrolled in groups of three. Posters and signs depicting criminals and thieves lined the walls, some faded and others barely two days old.

"ZZZ... ZZZ... ZZZ..."

And looming over the oasis in the desert, the crown jewel of this otherwise inhospitable world, an opulent and extravagant palace nearly eclipsed the blazing sun.

"ZZZ... ZZZ... ZZZ..."

But in *this* room, sitting with his back against the wall, two pairs of hands resting on his chest and the third folded behind his neck, a worn and well-browsed magazine labeled 'Weapons Monthly, December Issue' spayed across his face, Gilgamesh dreamt of things impossible to imagine.

"ZZZ... *Hildibrand? What a ridiculous character...* ZZZ..."

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 12 - Modern Love

As the six-armed swordsman slumbered away the afternoon, content with dreaming about mysterious things that would never come to pass, pebbles, dust and small pieces of sandstone drizzled past the window. Above the room functioning as his hideout, something resembling a sharpened blade stabbing through solid rock deepened his snoring. But still sleeping like a log, ignorant of the world around him, Gilgamesh never saw the pair of hands, one bare and the other wearing segmented, sapphire-colored armor, grasped the top of the window from the outside.

"Tch!"

Perched upside-down courtesy of the Scissor Blade stabbed into the wall up to the handle, which her leg was currently looped through, Ryuko's cheek twitched. Feathery strands of ruby and black brushed against her face. A shoulder-length ponytail, tied together with several metallic pins and needles, rustled in the dry breeze as, with a

push of her sneakers and latching her fingers against dried mud and sandstone, she flipped into the repurposed broom closet.

"You've got to be kidding me."

Crouched on her toes on the windowsill, knees tucked against her chest and joints popping, Ryuko reached out, caught the Scissor Blade as it fell towards the earth, propped the hardened Life Fiber weapon on her shoulder and grumbled. God damn it! This was bullshit! After spending the last twelve or so hours searching every nook and cranny of this stupid world, going to the local Moogles Shop for clues and getting involved with nonsense she didn't care about, she finally tracked down Gilgamesh. He was right in front of her. Only the asshole was out like a freaking light!

He was *literally* unconscious!

"Oh well, time to start improvising, I guess."

She could always burn Gilgamesh's ass. Magic was efficient, quick and didn't require actually moving more than her arm. But after pondering potential consequences of the multi-armed swordsman leaping to his feet, literally on fire, hopping around the room like a rabbit, Ryuko dispelled the thought. Nah, that wouldn't work. While doing something that hilarious would make her feel better, it'd also seriously piss the asshole off. And whether she liked it or not, she wasn't here to annoy Gilgamesh. She needed his cooperation. Not to mention she wasn't in the mood to beat his pathetic ass into submission through brute force.

That wouldn't work this time.

Which gave her a devious idea.

"Let's see..."

A wicked grin stretched across her face as she flipped the Scissor Blade into a reverse grip, smashed it against the wall and caught a

particularly jagged chunk of sandstone. It might be dishonorable, but she really didn't give a shit. And so, without further deliberation, moral or otherwise, Ryuko flicked her wrist, sending the heavy projectile sailing towards a particular section of Gilgamesh's anatomy.

THUD!!!

As it turned out, the annoying bastard wore armor literally *everywhere*.

"COME AND GET SOME!!!"

It resembled a storm. A cacophony of well-timed movements and haphazard reflexes. Right on cue, Gilgamesh's eyes snapped open. The magazine went flying across the room. Muscles larger than her chest shifted into gear. Faster than most beings could follow, the massive statue of muscle, armor and ineffective bragging leapt forward. Fingers clenched what resembled a razor-sharp bladed pole nearly twice her height, which had been diligently concealed within the shadows.

"HIYA!!!"

Sliding forward with a loud and provocative roar, Gilgamesh swung at the bastard, or bitch, he wasn't one to judge, daring to intrude upon the sanctity of his temporary hideout.

CLANG!!!

"Morning, sleeping beauty."

Sarcasm dripped from Ryuko's heart as the naginata violently smashed against the Scissor Blade. An impact which released waves of concussive pressure. Blasts of pure physical force ricocheted across the room, tickling her nose and causing her hair to briefly sway. Yet her grip remained as strong as ever. And the

hardened Life Fiber weapon, superior in some regards to the Keyblade and inferior in other, hardly budged an inch, "Sleep well?"

"Huh? Ryuko?"

The self-proclaimed greatest swordsman in the realm of light's mind ground to a screeching halt at the woman standing before him. Or, err, crouching before him. This was an unexpected turn of events. Not only was he shocked by Ryuko's abrupt appearance, he was bewildered, mystified and all-around confused. Could this be the work of his enemies? Maybe the people wearing black coats? Nah. That wasn't it. He couldn't sense their strange magic. Or anything else. This was the genuine Ryuko. Although he didn't quite agree with her decisions about modern fashion, "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, you know, just thought I'd drop in and check up on ya."

Sparks danced between the Scissor Blade and Gilgamesh's naginata, which the asshole was *still* trying to drive straight through her shoulder, as her fingers flexed one by one, "Now, do you mind lowering this stupid thing?"

"Stupid!? How dare you!"

Despite barking angrily at the Keyblade Master's absurd, atrocious and insulting backhanded commentary, Gilgamesh nevertheless conceded the legitimate point. Right before shifting positions, snapping his arm forward and jabbing his finger between her eyes, "The Kikuichimonji isn't some second-rate glaive! Nor an ordinary naginata! It was forged in the Da-Chao Mountains in flames so hot they could only be quelled with the scales of the great and powerful Leviathan!"

"Blah. Blah. Blah. Don't care."

Ryuko planted her chin on top of the Scissor Blade, stabbed said weapon into the floor underneath the window and scoffed. She really

didn't care about Gilgamesh's stories. Not in the goddamn slightest. In fact, she'd rather study ancient Keyblade techniques in the Alexandria Castle Library with Steiner than listen to the six-armed asshole's bragging about the weapons he nicked from various weapons, "Do you know how long I've been searching for your dumb ass?"

"You were looking for me?"

The legendary naginata Kikuichimonji, his personal weapon of choice, scrapped against the ceiling as he stroked his chin. He was befuddled. Why in the name of Excalibur, which was next on his to-do list, would Ryuko come all this way to meet him? Wait! The answer was obvious! Only an idiot wouldn't notice what stood before their eyes, "That's fantastic news!"

"Huh?"

"Since you're here, we can finally have our rematch," Gilgamesh bellowed from the pit of his stomach, ignorant, purposely or otherwise, of the Keyblade Master's confusion, "You and me, Ryuko! Woman versus man... err, swordswoman versus swordsman! No plot twists, new characters or convenient fade away to stand in our way!"

After trying, and failing, to make sense of the guy's nonsense, which only served to give her a massive headache, Ryuko spat to the side, "I'm gonna ignore everything you just -"

"Heeeyyy, wait a second..."

Pausing in the middle of his speech, Gilgamesh turned aside one hand continuing to stroke his chin while two pairs of arms folded themselves across his chest, "It would take an immense genius to deduce my super-secret location. Hmmm... it seems your deductive skills have improved quite a bit. Not as great as my own. But a rather close second."

"Don't get ahead of yourself."

A twitch developed above Ryuko's eyebrow as she brushed aside the nonsensical bragging, "Mognet Central put out a 'four kupo' alert on you. Everybody from here to Lindblum knows you've stolen something important from the people in charge of this place."

"WHAT!?"

While her ears painfully rang from the sheer volume of Gilgamesh's screeching disbelief, she jabbed one thumb over her shoulder, pointing at the palace visible out the window, "Face it. Your 'grand adventure' ain't going as well as you think."

"No! That's impossible!"

Frustration, anger and a little envy swelled within Gilgamesh's heart. Darn those sarcastic, price-gouging, pom-pom-wearing little plushie furballs! He'd never trusted them! They always doubled - or even tripled - their prices whenever he browsed their wares. And legitimately at that! Not once, never in a thousand years, had he considered shoplifting! He was an honest customer! Moogles helped the local economies, even if they were obnoxiously rude. But seventy Gil for a potion? Outrageous and absurd! Hmph! If not for their union, his adventures would be so much easier.

No more stockpiling money, hoping the local Moogle Shop didn't arbitrarily decide to suck every last Gil from his pockets.

"Hold on..."

And just like that, his mind returned to the beginning. Why was Ryuko here? She was his sworn rival. The one he wished to defeat. Legitimately obtaining the Scissor Blade after besting her in single combat would be like Christmas and his birthday wrapped together. But the great Gilgamesh wasn't stupid! Ryuko *never* stopped by to see how he was doing. It was always the reverse. He shows up in Lindblum, boasting of his latest escapades and adventures. He takes

a few pictures with Mako, wrestles Gamagori when the behemoth of a human attempted to drag him to the nearest guard station and swapped stories with Satsuki.

Not to mention Ryuko's other friends.

Yet here she was, claiming to have spent hours tracking him down.

Which was quite curious.

"If you were looking for me, that can only mean one thing."

STOMP!!!

"HA! HA! HA! HA! AND ONE MORE HA!!!"

With each stomp of his boot, blades manifested from what feebler minds could only be described as a pocket dimension into his outstretched fingers. Lightbringer, Galatyn, Tournesol, Dragon Whisker and at the very end, sweeping upwards alongside dark light, Zantetsuken. These were only a small fraction of his collection! Some of the weapons gathered and found over the last decade, including one or two repeat adventures! Each of the legendary acquisitions glimmered dangerous, exposing magical power and unfathomable abilities, the likes of which mortal minds could never imagine!

"YOU THINK TO GET THE DROP ON ME!? BALDERDASH!!!"

Crossing the magnificent weapons one over the other, he spun around, picked one foot off the ground, cleared his throat with a hearty cough and bellowed.

"I, THE GREAT GILGAMESH, SHALL NOT GO QUIETLY INTO THE SUNSET!!!"

"Oh, shut up."

Twisting a finger inside her ringing ear, Ryuko tiredly yawned, "I ain't here to bring you down. If I was, I'd be standing over there..."

The Scissor Blade swept off her shoulder towards the barricaded door across the room.

"... while Beatrix, and maybe Satsuki, beat your ass black and blue."

Gilgamesh's eyes narrowed. His mouth pursed behind the crimson scarf wrapped around the lower half of his face. Yet slowly but surely, some of the tension dissipated from his tightly wound posture. And a modicum of hope sprang inside his heart, "Really?"

Ryuko snorted.

"Hell no!"

Her sneakers slapped against the floor as she vaulted off the window. She reached no higher than Gilgamesh's chest. The guy was almost the same height as Gamagori. Maybe even one or two inches taller. Yet despite the physically obvious details, she loomed far larger than the swordsman. Her presence filled the room, drowning out everything else. Because she was *pissed*, "If I was going to do that, I wouldn't have bothered waking you up before pushing your face through the wall! So, either put those things away..."

In a flash of crimson stars, Threadcutter manifested in her empty hand.

"... or I'm gonna change my mind."

Out-armed six to two, Scissor Blade and Keyblade versus half a dozen illegally-obtained legendary weapons, Ryuko scoffed without a hint of fear in her heart, "You got five seconds."

"Well, when you put it that way..."

As concerning as the deadline was, Gilgamesh kept his cool. Not through intense meditation. But humming. And in the back of his throat. And not so much humming but remembering the lyrics to one of the new songs going around Lindblum. Hmph! Ryuko's promise of egregious bodily harm was nothing more than an empty threat! He was Gilgamesh! The greatest swordsman in all worlds, east and west. Darkness and light feared his presence! The shadows whispered his name! Legends spoke of him with immense reverence! If push truly devolved to shove, his odds of him single-handedly defeating Ryuko, which involved bypassing her regeneration, superhuman strength, magical abilities, the Scissor Blade and Keyblade hovered around five percent.

Maybe seven percent if she had a bad cold.

Those weren't exactly *good* odds.

"Hmm..."

He was stuck between a rock and a hard place. His first option was the easiest. Challenge Ryuko to honorable... ish combat with their respective blades on the line as grand prizes. One of his legendary weapons against her Scissor Blade. A confrontation, win or lose, potentially ending with him thrown into jail. If not by her hands, then Beatrix or Satsuki's. Or, on the other hand, he could always reschedule their destined battle. There wasn't exactly any rush. Besides, he already had plans to add a few more weapons into his collection. And being nice and friendly with Ryuko meant not getting her fist shoved through his face.

Ugh, such terrible choices!

"Bah! Fine!"

Without further discussion or introspection, Gilgamesh collapsed onto the floor, thrust two legendary blades on either side of his body and begrudgingly huffed, "Speak your mind! But don't expect me to wilt under your interrogation like withered flowers!"

Ryuko couldn't make heads or tails out of the guy's analogy. Withered flowers? What the hell did *that* mean? She didn't know. And she really didn't care, "Let's start with the obvious."

The tension between their respective levels of stubbornness electrified the atmosphere. Like most times the bastard opened his mouth and spewed random crap that made no sense, she drowned out his voice while slowly, *extremely* slowly, lowering the Scissor Blade. Yet never dropping her guard. Or blinking. Because if she did, and she *had*, Gilgamesh would abuse her burst through the nearest wall and run away like a goddamn coward.

"Why the hell are you still here?"

To her surprise, Gilgamesh didn't so much as blink.

"Huh? What sort of interrogation is this?"

She repeated the question, only with emphasis on every other syllable, "WHY are YOU still HERE!?"

"Are you implying that I, the great Gilgamesh, is a coward!?"

"Damn right I am!"

Stalking across the room until she was standing eye-to-eye with the six-armed swordsman, thief and criminal, Scissor Blade pressing against the underside of his chin while Lightbringer and Dragon Whisker tickled her armpits, a single twitch from driving through her lungs and heart and out the other side, Ryuko snorted, "What's wrong? You gonna do something about it?"

"I find your baseless accusation utterly offensive!"

He countered Ryuko's withering glare with one of his own. Albeit, it wasn't exactly up to her level. But effort counted, "Hmph! Where's the trust and camaraderie? And to think I thought you were my sworn

rival! The only person I considered equal to myself! Maybe it's time I found someone else! A more worthy antagonist!"

CLANK!!!

"Don't try changing the subject!"

The Scissor Blade, which extended into Decapitation Mode while he'd been distracted, stabbed through the floor between his legs. He looked down, then back up, a single bead of sweat dripping down his chin at the crimson weapon's close proximity to his most vital organs. A momentary lapse that allowed Ryuko to swing Threadcutter off her shoulder, twist it around and point the Keyblade between his eyes, "I know you! If you stole what you were looking for, you'd be long gone! But you're not! You're still here! And that means your latest adventure went freaking sideways! Am I right?"

Brushing aside the Keyblade with the back of his middle left hand, Gilgamesh rolled his eyes.

"I... have no idea what you're talking about."

In response to the obvious lie, Ryuko pushed the Scissor Blade a little further into the ground, while slicing the hardened Life Fiber weapon an inch closer to the bastard's most vulnerable area, "AM I RIGHT?"

"Grr... ALRIGHT! FINE! I lost it!"

That wasn't what she expected the asshole to confess, "Lost it? What the hell does that mean?"

"Are you deaf? Don't make me repeat myself!"

Hatred clung to Gilgamesh's heart. He wasn't one for putting pride before business. But nobody, and he meant *nobody*, stole something he risked everything to acquire. The culmination of weeks of meticulous planning, memorizing guard schedules and bypassing as

much of the palace's defenses as humanly possible through back doors in the realm of darkness. And for what? To have a fat, cocky, no-good thieving bandit mock his efforts with an insulting kiss to the lips? All while he evaded, dodged and fought the royal guards? Ooh! Just thinking about that bastard made his blood boil.

"There I was, making my amazing escape, when this pudgy bandit nicks Anastasia from my belt!"

He folded two pairs of arms, one over the other, and pouted, "Therefore, until I recover the legendary scimitar from his greasy hands, I'm not leaving this world! Not for anything! Not even your Scissor Blade!"

Ryuko found herself literally speechless.

"Heh..."

After an awkward-enough pause, birds chirping through the window, a faint breeze brushing against the back of her neck and the stifling afternoon heat briefly vanishing when the sun passed behind a close, the corners of her mouth curled into an arrogant smirk, "Never thought I'd see the 'great Gilgamesh' outwitted by a bandit."

"HEY!!!"

Ignoring the asshole's oh-so-witty retort, Ryuko yanked the Scissor Blade out of the floor with no discernable effort. And just as easily, flicked her wrist. Accompanied by loud metallic clicking, the hardened Life Fiber weapon collapsed until it was no bigger than her fingers. Interlocked threads shifted and morphed until the blade resembled nothing more than half of a pair of normal shearing scissors, "Gotta say, it's hilarious watching you get worked up over someone stealing your shit."

["It's not hilarious!"](#)

Threadcutter glimmered in the sunlight as she worked out the crick in her shoulder, "Yeah, it is."

"Your ignorance is astonishing!"

Lightbringer and Dragon Whisker lowered themselves as Gilgamesh pondered his terrible fortune. How stubborn could someone be? After everything they'd been through, Ryuko didn't trust his judgment? *He* was the weapon aficionado! A connoisseur of swords! A collector of legendary daggers, halberds, katanas and various tools of combat! She might wield a fancy Keyblade - and, well, not to mention the superb Scissor Blade - but that changed absolutely nothing!

"Anastasia is dangerous! Far more than you might think! Why else would the scimitar be sealed underneath that eyesore of a palace?"

Ryuko's expression remained unchanging, "Oh, I don't know, probably because it *belonged* to the sultan!"

"That's what they *want* you to think."

Gilgamesh released most of his collection back to the pocket dimension in which they normally remained safe and sound. Leaving only Galatayn as his weapon of choice, the crystalline sapphire greatsword practically shimmering in the enchanted multicolored light reflecting off Ryuko's Keyblade, as he looked around, leapt onto his feet, folded one pair of arms across his chest and sighed, "Now that it's missing, who knows what might happen! This whole world could be in jeopardy!"

"That's *your* fault!"

"No! It's the bandit's fault for stealing it!"

"But YOU stole it first, dumbass!"

"Bah! Semantics!"

Her eyebrow twitched. And not in a good way. Gilgamesh was testing her patience. Yet something bugged her. The guy was an asshole. He was a criminal with a crime spree stretching across most of the Realm of Light. But when it came to all sorts of weapons, he knew his shit. No matter what she personally thought, Gilgamesh was an expert. Give him a sword and he'd know everything about it. From its composition to any imperfections. No matter how hard she wracked her heart, searching for any excuse, Ryuko couldn't remember another time the guy had been *this* upset about a weapon.

Maybe there really was something to his excuse.

"Alright..."

With a soft sigh, the fury washed from her heart. A calmness enveloped her mind. And leaning against the window, facing her back towards the streets and buildings, Ryuko folded her arms, Threadcutter included, "Start talking. From the beginning! And skip the details!"

Gilgamesh, of course, didn't skip the details.

"... honestly, who has the time to carve zodiac symbols into pillars, each made of seven segments capable of independent rotation?"

Threadcutter visibly quivered in her white-knuckled fingers. Her sneaker incessantly tapped against the floor. A twitch developed over her left eyebrow. And as the bastard kept prattling about countless traps, skeletal warriors and puzzles requiring someone with exceptional speed, temporal magic or the Keyblade to overcome, seemingly without breathing, she mentally drowned out his voice.

It was the only way to stop herself from beating the shit out of him.

"... in the chamber beyond the giant hourglass, floating above the dais, twinkling like water in the winter morning, was Anastasia!"

Darkness caressed her heart, mind and body as she slowly, and with great deliberation, unfolded her arms, the Scissor Blade extending for the second time in so many minutes.

"... and so, after throwing off my determined pursuers, I tracked down the bandit. But he'd already left town. And... uh... long story short, I'm sticking around until I find his hideout."

That was the last straw.

But luckily enough, Gilgamesh had finally wrapped up his story.

"Let's see if I understand what you're sayin'."

Her voice was strained. Really strained, "You broke into the palace, fought and solved your way through the dungeon, found the damn sword -"

"Scimitar."

Ryuko purposely ignored the bastard's correction with as much forgiveness and patience remained in her darkening heart, "... SWORD, escaped, tripped the alarms, *lost* said weapon to some asshole and now, after all that, you're refusing to leave without it. That right?"

"Yeah. Pretty much. I mean, you skipped a few details. But that's not the point! Right now, I need you to -"

"I'm not gonna help you."

The multi-armed swordsman's mind was thrown into a lurch by her brutal honesty.

"B-But you're a Keyblade Master!"

"Yeah."

"Sworn to protect the light from darkness!"

"Right again."

"You've stopped dastardly malefactors who threatened to destroy the world! Slaughtered thousands of Heartless! Maleficent fears your presence with every bone in her crippled body!"

Ryuko scratched her cheek as Threadcutter dissipated in an explosion of crimson light and stars, "Is there a point to this?"

The connoisseur of legendary and powerful weapons couldn't believe the woman's nonchalant behavior.

"This defies common sense! Why won't you help me?"

"Because I didn't come all this way to solve *your* goddamn problems!"

That wasn't, of course, the real reason she refused to help Gilgamesh. Unlike whatever sick fantasies lurked inside his heart, she wasn't arrogant, prideful and short-tempered to the point of throwing away everything she cherished for the sake of revenge. Not anymore. Not since... well, not for a goddamn long time. Nothing in his story suggested Anastasia was anything more than a royal heirloom. Nothing special. If it truly was as dangerous as he claimed, she'd track it down. Because she was a Keyblade Master. Keeping the worlds safe from darkness was her job. If that meant wasting another few days on Agrabah hunting down the bandit, recovering Anastasia and hand-delivering the sword back to the palace, so be it.

Mickey would understand.

But like *hell* would she say anything like that to the six-armed bastard.

"If I didn't need to find *you*, I wouldn't even be here!"

"Hold on..."

Gilgamesh scratched his chin, "You're here to see me? Why?"

It took considerable effort to not immediately break the bastard's nose.

"Mickey's gone off and vanished. Probably somewhere in the Realm of Darkness," propping the Scissor Blade on her shoulder, she glanced around the room, "Since you're the only one we know who can open doors to that place... and isn't batcrap insane or evil... I figured he might've come to you for help."

"Hmm... an interesting question."

Ryuko felt her mouth twitching when Gilgamesh leaned against the wall, scratched his chin and audibly frowned, "Don't give me that! Did you speak with Mickey? Yes or no!"

"Err... recently?"

His genuine confusion threw her through a loop. But not enough to derail her train of thought, "Like the last few days. Maybe even a week."

"Ain't that a loaded question..."

Throwing one pair of arms into the air, inadvertently carving a moon-shaped scar into the ceiling with Galatyn, the swordsman huffed, "Alright, I suppose I'll tell you everything I might know. But on one condition!"

"Oh *great*..."

She should have seen this coming. Gilgamesh wasn't a villain. He wasn't evil or controlled by darkness. Not like Maleficent. But he was greedy. And an asshole. Grumbling loud enough for everyone in a two-block radius to *sense* her annoyance, Ryuko pinched the bridge of her nose, "Let me guess. You want *me* to help *you* get back that weapon, right?"

"Exactly!"

Gilgamesh scratched his cheek, "Say, you're *really* good at this, Ryuko. Maybe we're getting to know each other a little too -"

THUD!!!

"Still, since you're offering to help, there's no way I can refuse."

Paying as little attention as possible when Ryuko smashed her hand through the wall next to the window, destroying sandstone and dried mud without so much as a scratch, he stretched his shoulders, groaned and cleared his throat with another hearty cough, "Therefore, I, Gilgamesh, accept your assistance!"

"Shiiitttt...."

She didn't want to do this. She really didn't. Lending Gilgamesh a hand with anything was like getting her teeth pulled. Only worse. But if Mickey came to him for help getting into the Realm of Darkness, that information was important. More important than her personal feelings, "Ugh! Let's just get this over with before I change my mind."

"Mwahahaha! Ryuko and Gilgamesh! Fighting side by side!"

A bellowing chuckle echoed throughout the mostly-abandoned building when Gilgamesh threw his head back, "What could possibly go wrong?"

Last edited: Mar 23, 2019

Chapter 12.2

And... we're back here. Which is to be expected. Olympus Coliseum was one of the main worlds of Kingdom Hearts. There was no way I would ignore it. And, to be honest, I enjoy writing Hades.

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[https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/2/27/Coliseum_Gates_%28Art%29.png/800px-Coliseum_Gates_%28Art%29.png\]](https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/2/27/Coliseum_Gates_%28Art%29.png/800px-Coliseum_Gates_%28Art%29.png)

The streets of Thebes were packed with thousands of people, some dressed in togas and others wearing armor forged from brass and copper. And a few possessing auras befitting those known as heroes. Warriors whose feats of strength resounded across the world. Slayers of monsters. Half-divine soldiers, fighters and practitioners of lost martial arts. Mortal men and women who trained themselves beyond their limitations. Under the mid-day autumn sun, leaves just beginning to turn orange and yellow, they mingled in the shadows cast by the twelve statues carved in the likeness of the gods.

"Well, that was a bust..."

Ignorant of the culture and history surrounded them, blind to the knowledge looming overhead, Sora sighed, "It sounded like a lot of fun though."

"Fun, you say! Bah!"

For a moment longer than necessary, the court wizard remembered every detail of that particularly annoying conversation, "No self-respecting Keyblade wielder would ever do something so dangerously stupid."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

Another weary sigh emerged from Sora's heart as he folded both hands behind his neck. Man, this really sucked. If they registered for the games and beat everyone, they could have met that Zeus guy and asked him about Riku, Kairi, Ryuko and everyone else. One free request from the gods. That would have been something amazing, "So, what now?"

"We gotta stop by Alexandria."

Goofy's stomach rumbled at the thought of the famous, mouth-watering Alexandrian cuisine, "Master Beatrix needs to know about the keyhole."

"Keyhole... That's it!"

The sudden burst of childish excitement almost took Donald by surprise, "That's what? What are you talking about?"

"Don't you remember what Phil said? Whoever wins the Games gets to ask Zeus anything they want!"

With a smile more than wide enough to match the mage's furrowed brows, Sora pumped one hand into the air, "So, all we gotta do is beat everybody. That way, we can talk to Zeus and ask him where to find this world's keyhole!"

"Hmm..."

"Aw, c'mon," almost like a deflated balloon, Sora's excitement withered underneath the wizard's stubbornness, "Hey, Goofy. What do you think?"

Mulling over the difficult question, Goofy folded his arms and frowned, "Meddlin' is against the rules. But... hmm. Since ya have the Keyblade, Sora, I'm gonna follow you."

"See, Donald?"

Maybe he was a little too excited about having backup, but when it came to something this important to him, that didn't matter, "Goofy agrees with me!"

The short-tempered mage simply rolled his eyes and grumbled.

"I'm thinking! I'm thinking..."

Another squawking murmur confessed his growing frustration at getting boxed into the corner. As much as he didn't like the idea, and he *really* didn't like it, Sora had a point. A really good point. And maybe, just a little, shame bubbled in the depths of his heart. Not that he would tell anyone. After listening to Sora and Goofy talk about the stupid tournament over the last two hours had been a living nightmare. But ignoring a world didn't sit well with him. Not when countless worlds and millions of innocent people already fell victim to the relentless tide of Heartless.

"Alright, fine."

He immediately regretted caving into Sora's demands. But there wasn't any point arguing. If finding the keyhole was as easy as winning the competition or tournament or whatever that stupid goat called it, they had no other choice, "I guess looking for Ryuko and the king can wait a little longer."

Sora's smile nearly matched the sun, "Awesome!"

"I wasn't finished!"

In the blink of an eye, the court wizard's irritation returned at twice its original intensity. Maybe he'd been following the king's orders a little too literally, "The moment something goes wrong, we're leaving, got it!? Magic can't fix everything! And your Keyblade's too important to risk life and limb in some stupid contest!"

"Don't worry, Donald!"

Nodding vigorously, Sora's heartwarming grin grew even wider, "You've been teaching me magic! And Goofy's been helping me practice with the Keyblade! If I give it my best, there's no way we'll lose!"

"Hmm... I don't mean to be a stick in the mud, but how are we supposed to find Zack?"

He'd been thinking about it for quite a while. Ever since they left the coliseum earlier in the afternoon. With one finger absentmindedly scratching his chin and head swiveling back and forth, Goofy eventually crossed his arms, "Because I don't think that Phil fella told us what Zack looked like."

"Aw, man!"

Sora stomped his foot against the ground before slumping forward, "I forgot to ask!"

"You three look a little lost."

The smooth voice, carrying a hint of underlying menace, came out of nowhere. Standing within the shadows of one of the larger statues, not as grandiose as several others but still quite impressive, an imposing man casually checked his fingernails for dirt. Concealed by darkness, plumes of dark smoke, ichorous and thicker than the darkest shadows, billowed from his black toga. The acrid smog hovered across the ground, contrasting the blue flames functioning as his hair. And brought emphasis to the glowing yellow eyes, each seeming to penetrate into their collective hearts, narrowed with the slightest amusement.

"Charon's busy at the moment, but perhaps I can be of some assistance."

Still remembering that unnervingly cheerful woman in the pink coat, Donald aimed his staff squarely between the suspicious man's eyes, "Who are you!?"

"Name's Hades, Lord of the Dead."

Almost, and that was key, *almost* insulted by the flagrant breach of proper etiquette, the blue-tinted man stepped into the sunlight, "Hi, how ya doin'?"

"Hades?"

Something about the guy threw Goofy's mind through a loop, "Does that mean we're dead?"

To say the god of the underworld, ruler over millions of tortured souls and thunderhead's older brother, was taken a little, not much, off guard by the question was like asking if Sisyphus was still rolling that boulder up yonder hill. Sure, every putz from Thebes to Crete might ask that question. Or something along those lines. Am I dead? Who killed me? And his personal favorite - the desperate bribe. I'll give you anything you want! I just want to live! But that was in the past. And soon enough, future. After all, he was an exceptionally busy deity. Death was unstoppable. Everybody died... eventually.

Apart from those annoying immortals.

"Ha ha... no. I was simply in the neighborhood and happened to eavesdrop on your, shall we say, unfortunate predicament."

With the stage set and pawns in position, he brushed imaginary dust off his toga, "Geez, that stubborn goat really got you three. I mean, what sort of personal trainer *tricks* three perfectly good warriors out of participating in the Games?"

It was a little thicker than normal, probably because he was a little out of practice, but as expected, the naïve-looking brat latched onto the bait.

"What?"

Sora pivoted on the spot. Then looked back at Hades. Then back towards the coliseum. Before scratching his neck. There was something familiar about this guy. Really familiar. Which was odd because he couldn't remember ever *meeting* him, "He tricked us?"

"Let me take a shot in the dark."

Smoke carrying the acrid stench of death clung to his toga as he slowly circled around the morons, "You wanted to register for the Games. But that pompous fleabag pretty much laughed you out the door. Said you couldn't sign up. Not without talking to some schmuck. And upon meeting said stranger, you'd ask him to teach you the basics of heroism. A long and grueling course in the blatantly obvious."

Once he finished act one of his multi-stage strategy to send Wonderboy to an early grave, his mouth settled into a perturbed grimace, "Followed by a song and dance routine... ya know what, I think you get the picture."

Boy, talk about a cold reception. The glare from the duck could give one of Medusa's sisters a run for their silver coins. Did the half-naked talking pile of feathers lower his guard for a moment? It was worse than trying to convince Agamemnon going to Troy was bad for his long-term plans. Still, a little cold shoulder wasn't the worst thing in the world. When heroes, uninvited guests and family members constantly barged into the underworld, he learned to roll with the punches, "All said and good. Unfortunately, it's nothing more than a wild goose chase."

Goofy blinked.

"A wild goose chase?"

Sometimes the fates loved to remind him that a sucker was born every minute. Or, in this case, two of them. If only everything in life was this easy. He could conquer Olympus without lifting a finger. And the kid's expression? It warmed his shriveled heart! Betrayal,

depression and confusion. A potent combination. If he possessed the slightest shred of empathy, he'd probably feel a little guilty.

"If you ask me - and let me tell ya, there's nobody better to trust about this sort of thing - the goat wanted you three out of his hair until the deadline to register passed."

It almost hurt crushing the kid's hopes and dreams into the dirt underneath the dirt. But beggars couldn't be choosers. He had nephews to kill. Brothers to humiliate. A world to conquer and rule with an iron fist, "Which, if my sundial's correct, was... oh... ten minutes ago."

"Nice try!"

With a huff and a grumble, Donald stepped between Sora and Hades. He wasn't born yesterday! And neither was Goofy! Something about Hades rubbed them the wrong way. It might have taken Goofy a little longer to piece together the obvious, but whatever the guy was selling, they weren't buying, "You'd have to get up pretty early in the morning to pull one over on us!"

Unfortunately, despite the mage's well-honed instincts and intuition, Sora wasn't quite as observant.

"Why would he do that?"

Hades *couldn't* believe his good fortune.

"Eh, who knows?"

His remorse was *almost* genuine. To the extent, at the very least, nobody knew he thought empathizing with anyone nauseating. But the lull in the conversation - in other words, calmly waiting for the brat's heart to sink a little further into darkness - gave him time to think. So, this was Sora. The kid Maleficent swore up and down was the Keyblade wielder who almost stopped the Heartless from taking princess number five. Boy, talk about expectations. From the

brooding witch's description, he anticipated someone along the lines of the truly powerful masters. A warrior capable of going mano-a-mano with Wonderboy. And win. A *truly* dangerous threat to his plans. Not some naïve kid barely able to swing his stupid Keyblade.

Of course, there remained the question of *who* prevented miss personality from spying on the brat.

Because according to said pompous witch, someone interfered with her spell while Sora was dancing and prancing on that other world. Someone powerful. Someone with a hell of a lot of darkness.

Not him.

Although he'd been flattered by Maleficent thinking so highly of his abilities.

"However, you, my friend, are in luck."

FWOOSH!!!

It was a little overly dramatic, but hey, he was a fan of the classics. And who didn't love special effects? But with a snap of his fingers and emphasis on every syllable, a scroll appeared in a burst of blue flames. And as quickly, the piece of papyrus unraveled itself, exposing lines of small print and blurry text, "According to divine bylaws, nobody can register after the deadline. But if a sponsor - such as yours truly - had two fighters registered for the Game, but one happened to drop out for some mundane reason, they could, *technically*, fill that spot with anyone willing to complete the contract."

Another parchment, rolled into a scroll nearly as thick as the kid's wrist, materialized alongside acrid smoke smelling of despair and disease, "And it just so happens my backup warrior is a no-show. Family issues. Or something. A dog, maybe? Anyway, the *point* is, you want to fight. I've got an opening."

A midnight-black quill appeared out of nowhere, "All you gotta do, kid, is sign on the dotted line."

"Hmph!"

The so-called god's offer ruffled every feather on Donald's body, "As if we trust you!"

"What? C'mon, you can trust me. Why would I lie to you?"

He was *this* close to flambéing the duck until it was thoroughly cooked, sautéed and serving an entire extended family. If he weren't busy schmoozing up the kid, not only would he rub both hands down his face, he'd vent his annoyance on the nearest remainder of Wonderboy. But hey, no skin off his bones. Say the brat refused his respectable offer. Big deal. There were plenty of fish in the Aegean Sea, "Hector himself would take this deal. And trust me, convincing that guy to do anything's an effort in futility. Believe me. I've tried."

Out of nowhere, the memory came to Sora like a spinning blitzball to the face.

"Now I remember!"

Goofy scratched his forehead, "Remember what?"

Turning aside, one fist pumping in front of his chest and the other pointing at Hades, Sora exclaimed, "He's the guy who offered to help Ryuko if she kicked Jecht's butt!"

"Wait! Wait! Whoa! Time out, boys and girls!"

Almost a little too quickly to be anything other than genuine surprise, bafflement and several other strange emotions, Hades clapped his hands and cleared his throat, "I think something's stuck in my ear. Mind repeating that name?"

Sharing a strange look with Goofy and Donald, the former of whom shrugged, Sora tilted his head sideways, "Uh... Ryuko?"

"Talk about cutting through the proverbial Gordian Knot."

After brushing off his shoulders, adjusting his toga and giving his best smile to the morons, the Lord of the Dead awkwardly chuckled, "Will you three give me a moment?"

The idiots couldn't so much as raise a finger in protest before he disappeared, moving through the darkness faster than mortals could blink.

"**WHAT** in the **RIVER STYX** is going on **HERE**!?"

Upon reemerging in some scum-infested alley, devoid of life itself, a small portion of his patience snapped. Cold sapphire flames erupted into an orange inferno hot enough to sublimate marble and stone. Which of the three fates did he piss off? Did he somehow forget to honor an oath? He couldn't think of anything obvious. Or anything to explain this sudden, annoying kick in the proverbial keister.

"Okay. Fine. Fine. I'm cool. I'm fine."

Alright, so the naïve brat somehow knew Ryuko. And he had a Keyblade. And knew Ryuko. Big whoop. Why in the seven wonders of the modern world was he upset? He was the great and powerful ruler of the underworld, Lord of the Dead and countless other titles. He could go mano-a-mano with his brothers. In the underworld, he was practically invincible. Nobody could hurt him. Not to mention the Heartless loaned by the brooding witch.

He just needed to snap his fingers and - poof! - Heartless overwhelm the three stooges before the mosaic finishes drying.

"Oy, knowing how *well* this day's already going, that pipsqueak will probably tear through the creatures like yesterday's moussaka."

The shadows lengthened as he, quite vigorously, tossed the idea off Mount Olympus, "Leaving me right back at square one."

Running a hand through his burning hair, Hades mulled over the various options on the table. Assuming the brat *really* knew Ryuko, and it wasn't just a common name on some random world, he needed to be smooth. And, most importantly, not act like a braindead idiot. The last thing he needed was unwanted attention. On her own, the broad was bad enough. But the other masters?

"Alright."

He breathed deeply, held the air for a moment, and exhaled. Framing both hands on other side of his face, he prepared himself. Focused his thoughts. And repressed the urge to upchuck his breakfast, "Time to work some magic."

Reappearing in an eruption of smoke in the same spot, Hades propped a hand against his chest, "Just to be *perfectly* clear. We're talking about the same Ryuko, right? Yay high, mystical sword shaped like a scissor, vernacular worse than a siren-starved sailor?"

Sora coughed as the smoke hit his lungs, "I think she's a little taller than that."

Donald huffed, "That's Satsuki!"

"Oh, right," Sora admitted before backtracking, "Come on, really? No way!"

"Hmm..."

The Lord of the Dead mulled over the blatantly obvious with sarcasm befitting the best critic.

"From your oversized shoes, lack of acne and slightly breaking voice, I'm guess you're, what, fourteen?"

A finger stroked his chin. His lips puckered together. And muttering in the back of his throat, Hades rolled both eyes nearly out of his skull. Plausible deniability was one hell of a damn good excuse. There was

no one alive, or dead, better than him at maintaining a low profile. He was a natural. Not even thunderhead knew when he stepped off-world for a short meeting with Maleficent and her union of misfits, villains and annoying idiots, "Too young for the ambrosia. Geez Louise, no wonder that goat sent you halfway across town."

The last mumbled comment was more to himself than the brat. But that didn't stop the half-naked duck with serious trust issues from giving him the stink eye, "According to my sister-in-law, yadda, yadda, yadda..."

His hand spun clockwise with every additional drop of sarcasm, "... blah, blah, etcetera, so on and so forth, the minimum age any 'prospective hero' can register is seventeen."

"Aw man..."

The wind deflated from Sora's sails. Well, that explained while Phil hadn't taken his question about registering for the Games seriously, "Well, thanks anyway..."

"Hold your horses, pipsqueak."

This was hands-down, without a doubt, one of the riskiest things he'd done since that blind date with Persephone. Sure, the broad was lovely and told great jokes. But her mother? Talk about a woman scorned. Throwing the world into eternal winter because she couldn't handle an empty nest? Yeesh, and he thought his temper was bad. Demeter *seriously* needed to get out of the house more often than once per century, "I may have a solution to both our problems."

Smirking in the smarmiest manner possible, he flicked his wrist, disintegrating the one-sided contract - heavily in his favor, of course - in a burst of searing blue flames, "You see, my friend, gods, such as my handsome self, must rewards mortals who complete any and all quests, tasks, adventures and riddles. No ifs, ands or buts."

Soot, ash and other particulates fluttered towards the ground, "Unfortunately, your friend - Ryuko, was it? - left before I had the opportunity to repay her services."

The Lord of the Dead cracked his neck. First to the left. Then to the right. Then once more to the left. He shook the tension from his shoulders. Cleared his throat with an exceptionally loud cough. And once sufficiently relaxed, snapped his fingers, summoning an intricate, gold-embroidered scroll out of thin air, "And as much as I hate doing this, the Furies have been on my tuchus for *years*."

"Huh?"

As the strange scroll fell into his waiting hands, Sora found himself utterly baffled, "What's this?"

"Oh, nothing much. Just the written equivalent of a 'godly favor.'"

A quick examination of his nails, followed by flicking a piece of dirt through the air onto Athena's statue, preempted an explanation, "The thing about laws, divine or otherwise, is they *all* have loopholes. According to page seven, section two, paragraph five of the divine bylaw rule book, third edition, an acquaintance of the mortal - in other words, you - who fulfilled a god's quest or mission - me, of course - can accept said reward in their place. Providing both parties agree to the terms. Which means, shorty, that favor is now yours. But. And follow along."

With a pinch of his fingers too fast for the brat's eyes to follow, he snatched back the divine favor, good until the heat death of the universe, "If you give that favor back to me..."

A loud snap and crackle accompanied the extravagant scroll returning to the deepest, darkest depths of the underworld. Followed by another piece of parchment manifesting in his other hand, "Congratulations! You're now registered for the Games."

Over the course of the suspicious god's annoying charade, Donald's eyes narrowed further and further, "What's the catch?"

"Oh, there's no catch."

It was breathtakingly painful giving away something for absolutely nothing, "Of course, *participation* is optional. Can't make you do anything. What, with free will and all. Anyway, if you'll excuse me..."

Stretching his shoulders and cracking his fingers one by one, he turned around, "... the underworld doesn't run itself. Thanks to that love spat in Troy, I've been pulling all-nighters for weeks. Bon voyage!"

In a puff of acrid smoke darker than the darkest of nights, he reappeared in the underworld. Absentmindedly tossing a silver coin to Charon, he ascended the granite stairs leading to his personal chambers without saying a word. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. Not so much as a huff of annoyance. Pain and Panic, the moronic henchmen mucking up the afterlife, threw themselves at his sandals before fleeing in the opposite direction when the cold steps underneath their clawed feet began glowing red-hot.

Halfway up the stairs, smoke began rising from his shoulders and hair.

As he reached the horrendous obsidian doors, opening and closing them without so much as a sound, blue flames crackled from every conceivable surface.

And upon walking over to the window, looking outside and taking a deep and calming breath, he promptly vented his frustrations.

"DYEAGGHH!!!"

Flames hotter than molten magma shot halfway across the underworld as his blue-tinted skin turned burning orange.

"OF ALL THE POSSIBLE, STUPID COMPLICATIONS!!!"

The temperature skyrocketed beyond the sublimation point of lead.

"A SCHLEMIEL WITH A KEYBLADE WALTZES OUT OF NOWHERE!!!"

The entire underworld shook from the force of his unbridled rage.

"AND HE'S FRIENDS WITH THE ONE PERSON I'M TRYING NOT TO PISS OFF!!!"

Debris, lost souls and other miscellaneous rubble fell from the underworld's ceiling as he punched the wall.

"COULD THIS DAY GET ANY WORSE!?"

But just as quickly, no less temperamental than a raging volcano, he abruptly calmed down.

"Okay, okay, stay cool."

Chortling more to himself than genuine amusement, he ran a hand through his fiery hair. And with the calming orchestra of countless misery, suffering and eternal torment music to his ears, rubbed his temple, "You're overreacting. C'mon, did you see those two bozos? No way they let the brat risk life and limb. There's a greater chance Wonderboy loses to some blind idiot."

A long and awkward silence, heavier than the world resting upon Atlas's shoulders, settled in the air.

"I need a drink."

With more than a hint of resignation, he dragged one hand down his face and summoned a green martini out of thin air. He'd come too far, worked too many angles and put up with too many idiots to have Ryuko's protégé muck everything up. Personally, the brat kicking the bucket wouldn't cause him to lose a wink of sleep. Accidents

happened all the time. If a thorn in their side happened to encounter a sudden case of severe exsanguination? Big deal. People died all the time. He would know. There were hundreds of millions of lost souls screaming every waking moment of every freaking day.

But the brat earning a one-way ticket to the great beyond would be annoyingly terrible for business.

"Great. Terrific. As if things weren't bad enough."

Slamming the drink in one shot, he tossed the empty glass over his shoulder and out the window, where it eventually hit Panic on the head, "I *hate* altering contracts."

Last edited: Mar 29, 2019

Even's Reports - III & IV

Even's Report III

Several weeks has passed since that horrific evening. Although my wounds have long since healed, my thoughts remain focused on Subject 29F. Her twisted and misshapen appearance haunts my dreams. The echoes of her blood-curdling screams weigh heavily upon my heart. Nothing can possibly justify what I've done. But I must continue my research. If her senseless death prevents millions more, that is a price I'm willing to bear.

Yet how many before me have justified heinous and unmistakably immoral actions in the name of the greater good?

Lord Ansem has proven immeasurably helpful regarding avenues of unorthodox research. While his primary focus might be Xehanort's unmistakable fascination with darkness, memories and the heart, he's more than aware of the dangers posed by Life Fibers. And what might happen to this peaceful world, and countless others, if the parasites were to manifest themselves without warning. It's thanks to his insight and understanding my research continues unabated. Following Subject 29F's rampage through the lower levels of the castle, Braig wanted to destroy every trace of the Life Fibers.

It was only thanks to Lord Ansem, who explained to Braig and the others the importance of studying Life Fibers, that I'm able to continue researching the blasted parasites.

I cannot let such undeserved benevolence go to waste.

When Life Fibers are woven into fibrous threads, their tensile strength, resilience to environmental forces and parasite nature increases without sacrificing elasticity and flexibility. An intriguing observation. But one which raised further questions. If one were to

mold Life Fibers into other forms, would their properties and characteristics change?

After several days and multiple failures (see Experiment Log 53A and 53B) I quite possibly found the answer.

The process required weaving Life Fibers into thin sheets seven by seven centimeters in area, stacking dozens of sheets upon each other and compressing them under pressure exceeding 15,000 PSI. While I'm still deducing the underlying biological reasons, extreme pressure somehow renders the parasites into an almost metallic form. The Life Fibers which undertake this 'hardened' procedure exhibit strange properties. Tenebrispectroscopy and lumenspectroscopy cannot detect anything more than the slightest traces of darkness and light. They no longer require sustenance.

Their characteristic glow fades completely, leaving the hardened product a bright, blood-red crimson coloration.

And most unexpectedly, the hardened parasites become safe to handle.

But my experiment was an abysmal failure.

Creating the material required approximately eighty percent of my available stock of Life Fibers. A loss requiring more than two weeks of long and arduous cultivation. In addition, its hardness and tensile strength was generally inferior compared with the parasites' natural characteristics. However, strangely enough, their thaumavoric nature remained intact. Simply by touching the hardened Life Fibers with one's bare hand, it becomes impossible to cast magic.

Even in such an altered state, are the parasites somehow still alive?

I must know more.

Even's Report IV

Although he dedicates an inordinate amount of time testing the limits of the Heartless Manufactory alongside Xehanort and my fellow apprentices, Lord Ansem remains fascinated with my research. Particularly my most recent discovery.

I've yet to alleviate the hardened metal's uncharacteristic brittleness compared with the source material. A remarkable failure. But upon reviewing my sanitized notes and handling the subdued parasites with his own hands, Lord Ansem believes the applications of such a discovery could possibly outweigh the consequences. Providing, of course, every precaution was taken. To think, against structures coated with Life Fiber metal, magical attacks would be ineffective. Mages, sorcerers and other wielders of magic could be imprisoned with shackles forged of hardened Life Fibers.

The applications would be limitless!

But I have not studied Life Fibers to harness them!

The parasites aren't weapons to be used against one's enemies! Nor are they a means of protecting this peaceful world from those seeking to unleash darkness and misery on uncountable thousands! They are abominations anathema to life itself! Eldritch creatures from beyond the borders of Radiant Garden! If granted the chance, they would devour everything in their path until nothing remained but withered corpses!

Despite Lord Ansem's curiosity and support regarding the hardening procedure, I shall focus my efforts on methods of destroying Life Fibers.

However, my attempts have so far proven less effective than originally anticipated.

While starvation and mana-deprivation remain the best methods of destroying Life Fibers, other weaknesses must exist. But what? Antibiological chemicals have minimal effect. Both pesticides and fungicides, as well as anti-parasitic compounds, have proven equally

unsuccessful. The only method I've determined for dissolving Life Fibers is perchloric acid at almost fifty percent solution in distilled water. But my elation at such a discovery was short-lived. Because as I observed the parasites writhing within the acidic mixture, a new and disturbing characteristic manifested itself.

Fifty seconds after introducing perchloric acid, organic bubbling and hydrogen chloride ceased production. Twenty-three seconds later, all signs of distress disappeared. The parasites were no longer affected by the aqueous solution. Furthermore, subsequent attempts in stronger solutions proved equally unsuccessful at eliciting organic reactions.

Against all logic and reason, the Life Fibers somehow adapted to the perchloric acid.

Yet that is not why my hand trembles.

After logging the remarkable biological reaction, I replicated the experiment with another sample of Life Fibers. My intent was determining the time between successful introduction of environmental hazards and adaptation. I'd hoped to discover a weakness. Or perhaps a limitation. Surely the parasites could only adapt only so much. There had to exist a point where they could no longer do so. But the sample proved equally resilient. As did the third and fourth.

Could it be possible?

Do Life Fibers share memories?

And if so, does that mean they possess hearts?

Last edited: Apr 2, 2019

Chapter 12.3

*Every now and then I wonder how history was taught on Honnouji. Given the world was a *close* approximate to our own - ignoring, of course, Life Fibers - did the history match the other worlds? For example, was Honnouji's version of ancient Greece similar to our own or to Hercules? And if they were different, why? What could cause two divergent versions of ancient Greece when every world originated from a single beginning? Food for thought, I suppose.*

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/e/e7/Coliseum_Gates_Entrance_%28Art%29.png/800px-Coliseum_Gates_Entrance_%28Art%29.png]

Philoctetes, or plain old Phil to anyone not volunteering to reenact Prometheus's punishment, stared at the chalkboard.

"What the -"

He couldn't believe his eyes. It was impossible. And he meant *literally* impossible. For good measure, he rubbed his face. But as expected, despite his hopes, nothing changed. And that irritated him more than anything. He didn't *like* getting fleeced. How in Zeus's static-free boxers did the brat track down Zack, gotten the guy's approval and hustled back to the coliseum before registration for the Games closed? Nobody could have pulled that off. And not for a lack of trying. It was a literal - seven letters - task for one reason. The spiky-haired warrior had been practicing in the pitch the entire afternoon.

Which meant, in short order, no way, no how could the pipsqueak have found the guy.

Yet the kid's name was at the bottom of the chalkboard.

In bold red letters.

"How?"

While he examined the ceiling-to-floor length chalkboard for irregularities, up to and including nearly tearing it off the refurbished masonry, the target of his mounting confusion folded both hands against the back of his head and grinned, "Guess this means I'm going to the Games, huh?"

The friendly comment lacked any noticeable outward malice, which only worsened his mood. And gave him a headache. Stroking his goatee, the right side of his face scrunched tightly in thought while the other half twisted into a half-formed grimace, Phil grumbled underneath his breath. How in the Underworld did the kid cheat the system? There wasn't any evidence of tampering or forgery. Either the pipsqueak could teleport, turn invisible, mimic his handwriting and was powerful enough to render the Pantheon's divine magic useless. Or, far more likely, the brat registered when he headed back into the coliseum.

And was therefore older than sixteen.

"Yeah. Yeah. Don't rub it in."

It took a moment for the truth to settled into his heart. Geez, was the kid really seventeen? He honestly couldn't believe it. Not even Herc had been this scrawny. And that guy had been the epitome of gangly. An honest to Zeus klutz with no hand-eye coordination but more than enough strength to shatter boulders. Didn't the pipsqueak's parents feed him? Heck, did the kid know what food was? With those question and dozens more at the top of his mind, Phil brushed off his shoulders, refusing to fall victim to the charade, "Could've sworn you weren't close to seventeen."

"No problem."

Sora chuckled despite Donald rolling his eyes, "People say that all the time."

"You ain't kidding..."

The trainer to demigods, heroes and hero-adjacent fighters gave the suspicious comment less than a moment's thought, "Anyway, sorry about the misdirection. I pull that stunt on every snot-nosed punk. Rule number twenty - children *don't* compete! No ifs, ands or buts! And no, I repeat, *no* exceptions for anybody!"

"Is that why ya sent Sora on a wild good chase?"

Goofy mulled over Phil's confession as they passed empty food, drink and souvenir stands, "You were worried about him?"

"Me? Worried about this runt?"

An obnoxious chuckle encompassed the satyr's response.

"Don't make me laugh."

He almost *did* laugh at the question. Was he concerned about the pipsqueak? Not in the slightest. What he was concerned about was *liability*. Until five years ago, anyone over thirteen could register for the Games, bimonthly competitions, weekly tournament of power. But everyone who signed up knew the risks. Up to and including dismemberment, potential loss of life and immeasurably embarrassing defeats against one's sworn rival. But one catoblepas proving itself too much for an upstart brat - an obnoxious moron who just so happened to be the goddamn Oracle of Delphi's cousin - despite his *specific* warnings and suddenly Apollo's breathing down his neck.

"You wouldn't believe how many kids pick up a sword and think they're ready to clash with the titans."

Tossing his hands upwards through sheer exasperation, he stopped mid-speech upon noticing something out of place. One of the larger gold trophies was askew. No more than a couple of degrees. But more than enough to catch his undivided attention.

"Not to suggest some don't have what it takes."

A quick spit polish left the trophy glittering like recently-forged orichalcum, "But more often than not, heroes don't just walk into the coliseum begging to fight."

Clomp!

"But let's get one thing straight..."

Faster than the kid could blink, Phil turned around, glaring straight into those 'innocent,' quotes intended, blue eyes, "I *still* don't think you're seventeen. Something about your registration rubs me the wrong way. But as far as I can tell, everything legit. Therefore, unless you willingly withdraw your application, I can't stop you from competing."

"Alright!"

"Sure. Great. Hurray."

His sarcasm was thicker than the River Styx, "Come back in three weeks for your first match."

Sora was halfway through sharing another cheer with Goofy when the remark slammed against his heart.

"Three weeks?"

Sliding in front of Phil before the satyr could so much as *breath* another word, Sora's voice nearly cracked, "I thought the Games were *today!*"

"*Registration* ended today."

Despite the slight difference between their heights, Phil propped both fists on his waist and stared straight into the pipsqueak's eyes, "You think it's easy capturing monsters? That takes time! A lot of time! Three weeks of time!"

"Aw, man..."

Sora bit his lower lip, kicked one foot against the floor and sighed, "That sucks."

"Life is full of disappointments, kid."

Not bothered in the slightest by the thickening cloud of disappointment wafted off the kid's shoulders like last week's barbecue, Phil attempted to continue what he'd originally planned on doing, "Now, if you're done wasting my time, I have *real* heroes to train. Not three wannabe nobodies."

"Nobodies!?"

Donald's left eye twitched alongside the burning anger growing inside his heart, "We fought more monsters than you can count!"

"That's right!"

Uncurling one finger at a time, Goofy began counting off, "There's the Heartless. And the Unversed. And that strange book loaned to the king by -"

"Huh?"

A strange expression overcame Sora. His eyes widened. His gaze briefly unfocused as he leaned around Phil, causing the satyr to grumble about personal space. For a brief moment, he saw Kairi surrounded by weird blue monsters. But almost as quickly, the unfamiliar memories faded into nothingness, "Unversed? That some kind of powerful Heartless?"

"Ha!"

Phil snorted in the back of his throat, "I *seriously* doubt that."

"But it's true!"

With a friendly guffaw, Goofy wrapped one arm around Sora's shoulder and smiled, "Sora's saved an entire world from the Heartless! Using nothin' but the Keyblade!"

"Hero?"

Phil jabbed his thumb at the innocent-looking, naïve and short teenager.

"This runt?"

A long and awkward beat passed. And then another. But before the silence became deafening, he collapsed into hysterical laughter. This kid was a hero? That was the silliest thing he'd heard in years! If the pipsqueak was an infamous hero like Herc, known far and wide in every home and temple across the world, with action figures and merchandising rights, he would quit eating grass cold turkey.

"Boy, that's a good one!"

Wiping away the tear in the corner of his eye, he laughed one last time for posterity before taking a shuddering breath, "Didn't take you for the next coming of Aristophanes. You almost had me going there."

"Oh yeah?"

Indignation swelled inside Sora's heart. The normally friendly teenager's bewilderment turned upside-side. His expression rotated one hundred and eighty degrees until he was frowning alongside Donald. Snapping out his right hand, he grasped that comforting power. The soothing light which scattered the darkness. He clenched his fingers into an empty fist. And with an explosion of brilliant gold light, hues of amber and yellow brushing against his skin, he waved

the deceptively-simple Keyblade in front of the disbelieving satyr, "What do you call this?"

The personal trainer to demigods and divine-inspired heroes barely blinked.

"A detriment to any *good* fighter."

Sora's surprise was matched by Goofy and Donald, "Say what!?"

"Let me spell it out for you..."

Sometimes he hated his job. Not often. But every once in a while, when an eager and excited young face prances down the vestibule looking to become the next big hero, breaking down the truth always left an obnoxious taste in his mouth. Like he'd eaten rotten grass or week-old brambles. Disgusting. Nauseating. But heck, that was his job, "Over the years I've run into *four* people wielding swords like that. Four too many if you ask me. Because each and every time they dropped into town, something bad always happened. Like they had Eris on speed dial."

"But none of them relied on their so-called Keyblades."

With a wheezy huff and puff, bringing his arms into a basic fighting stance, Phil mockingly punched the air. First an uppercut. Followed by a quick jab. Then another one. He punched left and right. And finished with a powerful haymaker, "There was this one broad. She had it all. Skill! Technique! Years of experience! Sure, she had a Keyblade. And that other fancy sword. But she didn't use those things to nearly take down the reigning champ! You should've seen her in action! She analyzed the guy's movements! Learned his fighting style! If that other guy hadn't interrupted the fight, she might have won."

Sora grumbled at the obnoxious laughter. The guy didn't have to rub it in. He could've just moved on. But something about what Phil said

caught his attention. It seemed impossible but could he be talking about *that* particular match?

"You know..."

Deciding to play along, he propped the Keyblade on his shoulder, "... depending on who you ask, Ryuko and Jecht say they *both* won that fight."

The satyr whistled.

"You *sure* you're not from around here?"

When he didn't receive anything besides another childish shrug, Phil brushed aside the pipsqueak's question, "Anyway, look. Kid, you got spunk. I respect that. Heck, if you were a few years older, I'd *might* - keyword, *might* - have given you a few pointers. But it takes more than bravado and a fancy weapon to be a hero."

He managed three entire steps before Sora blocked his path.

"I'll prove to you I'm a hero!"

"Is that so?"

Just about rolling his eyes at the declaration, he folded his arms, sighed obnoxiously, scoffed and sarcastically asked, "And *how*, might I ask, do you intend on changing my mind?"

"I don't know."

The admission weighed heavily upon Sora's heart, "But I'm willing to do whatever it takes! No matter what!"

Phil knew that look. He recognized that nonsense running through the pipsqueak's three-sizes-too-big heart better than anyone in Thebes. The kid was prepared to do anything to prove him wrong. It was infectious. It was obnoxious. And a little humiliating. Pinching the bridge of his nose between two fingers, he couldn't help but

grumble under his breath. Which god did he piss off for his luck to be *this* bad? It didn't make sense. As far as he knew, he was on the up and up with Olympus. Not even the incident involving the Oracle of Delphi's cousin getting gored made things personal with Apollo.

"Alright! Fine!"

Spreading his arms far and wide, he begrudgingly acquiesced to the childish tantrum, "You want to prove me wrong? Head down to the pitch whenever you're ready."

Sora's eyes lit up brighter than the afternoon sun, "Does that mean -"

"Consider this a preliminary match!"

He heard the kid's question. Which was the reason he immediately squashed it underneath his hooves. This went against the rules. It was one thing giving special treatment to Herc. But a random pipsqueak? If anyone found out about this, he'd become the laughingstock of Thebes. He wouldn't be able to show his face around the coliseum, "Demonstrate you know how to handle that thing and *maybe* I'll change my mind."

"Really?"

Clomp! Clomp! Clomp!

"Probably not."

Descending the 'employees only' stairs one hoof at a time, he brushed aside the runt's audible disappointment, "But heck, stranger things have happened."

Tap! Tap! Tap!

"Sora..."

Off to the side, one foot relentlessly tapping against the floor, Donald glared at the retreating satyr. Fury simmered in his eyes. An eyebrow

twitched. With barely veiled frustration, he watched the guy vanish down the stairs. All without saying another word. But once Phil disappeared, he immediately folded his arms, pivoted on the spot and scoffed. The nerve of that stubborn goat calling them nobodies! Humph! He and Goofy were trained professionals! They'd fought more monsters than the guy could count! How could anyone possibly be so rude and insulting!? If he didn't have the patience of a saint, he'd show that annoying guy something fierce!

"Yeah, I know, Donald..."

Ignorant of the duck's inner dialogue, Sora folded both hands against the back of his neck, Keyblade having already vanished, "It's only one match. We can leave once I'm done, alright?"

"Are you kidding?"

While Goofy tapped a finger against the bottom of his chin, the court wizard stepped in front of Sora, glanced towards the stairs and huffed, "We're not going anywhere until you make that stubborn goat eat his words! Got it!?"

Sora's smile turned infectious.

"Don't worry!"

Bumping his fist against Donald's, who returned the gesture alongside goofy, Sora grinned from ear to ear, "We'll show him the power of the Keyblade!"

Chapter 12.4

A gentle, disarming humming filled the air. A melodious sound expressing nothing more than carefree innocence.

"Being a hero sure takes ~a lot~ of work."

The question that wasn't really a question clung to Nui's tongue as she playfully kicked her feet back and forth. One. Two. One. Two. Left. Right. Left. Right. Perched on the coliseum's wall, tucked between two statues, beyond the hustle and bustle of Thebes, outside the range of anyone wishing to interrupt her fun and excitement, her head bobbed side to side. Sapphire eyes, hidden within the pink hood concealing everything but her grinning, mischievous smile, stared downwards. Never blinking. Never straying. Not for a moment.

But once Sora and his friends walked onto the pitch, greeting the stubborn goat and his muscle-headed student, her grin, brighter than the sun, turned upside-down into a childish pout.

"I don't know why anybody bothers."

She already knew the answer, of course. It was obvious. Not that it made asking pointless, even if she didn't have a captive audience. Just because *she* disagreed didn't mean heroes were stupid. But being a straight-nosed goody-two-shoes had to be really, really tough on one's heart. And that was the gosh darn truth no matter who spun the facts! Heroes were constantly rescuing humans unable to protect themselves. They always worried some random, cliché bad guy would take their friends and family hostage. Or kill them. Or torture them. Or attempt to conquer everything.

And every once in a while, they faced the pointless choice of sacrificing everything for a group of pathetic nobodies who'd forget their existence once the next big 'hero' emerged.

Why would *anyone* want to be a hero?

"Hmm..."

Releasing another huff, she propped her hands behind her back, cheeks puffed outwards and stared upwards into the partially cloudy skies. At times like these, when everything appeared to fall into place, Ryuko's pretending to be nothing more than another pig in human clothing made no sense. Why would her sister subjugate herself to such insult? Humans were boring and predictable to the point of being downright pathetic. Of course, much like everything in life, there were ~some~ exceptions. But for the most part, manipulating humans was as easy as putting on underwear in the morning.

Unlike ~some~ people, she didn't even need darkness!

It wasn't hard. It wasn't difficult. Or required long-winded plans. Hearts were exceptionally fragile. All it took was torturing someone they loved for a human's heart to shatter into tons of itty-bitty pieces too numerous to count. Or even better, they might succumb to darkness without any prompting, turning them into another Heartless for Ryuko to put down.

And speaking of her stubborn sister...

"It looks like Ryuko's going to be busy for a while."

Why her sister put up with that six-armed annoyance was confusing. If *she* was in Ryuko's sneakers, she'd torture the guy for information and leave. But as long as Ryuko was preoccupied on another world, absolutely nothing stood between Sora and herself. Oh! Simply thinking about the kid made her heart flutter! Because she knew a lot of things! More than that grumpy sorcerer hiding in his tower. Not only about light and darkness, but everything laying in the middle and existing within the realm of nonexistence!

"So, I guess I have a little free time."

Which made Sora so gosh darn special!

Everything about the kid screamed interesting! Where did he find a Keyblade? How was he holding a Keyblade? What made him worthy of wielding a Keyblade? There were so many questions! Yet here Sora was, gleefully swinging the Keyblade back and forth like a blunt instrument. If only it were possible to read his heart like an open book! To pluck every scrap of information from his mind! Not to suggest she wasn't capable of doing something like that. She easy could. All with a single finger.

But messing with Ryuko, particularly after successfully tricking everyone into believing she died on Twilight Town, would be incredibly stupid.

"Oh?"

Something far below caught her attention.

"Now, what do we have here?"

Tilting her head slightly to the right, she watched Sora's boring yet otherwise functional Keyblade materialize alongside a brilliant eruption of golden light. No matter how many times he summoned it, she couldn't wrap her heart around how *simple* the darn thing looked. Every other Keyblade was beautiful. They represented their wielder's hearts. Or a deep and strong connection to something in their past.

"A practice match, huh?"

But Ryuko's cute protégé's Keyblade was entirely different. And in the blink of an eye, faster than the average human could possibly follow, Nui once more stood on her feet, the upper half of her body leaning forward at an obtuse and inhuman angle.

"Why don't we... spice things up!"

Holding up both hands, fingers twitching and curling, her mouth slowly but surely stretched into a menacing yet carefree smile. A bang of shoulder-length blonde hair tickled the bottom of her chin. Mirth danced within her gear-shaped pupils. The shadows covering her face darkened. But silhouetted against the sun beginning to dip beyond the western mountains, warm yellows quickly fading to cool oranges and purples, crimson threads spun into existence around her splayed fingers.

"Try not to be too much of a disappointment!"

Chapter 12.5

I thoroughly enjoyed writing this section. It was a good change of pace. And yes, there's more. But I needed to break it into multiple parts.

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/3/30/Hercules_KHREC.png/410px-Hercules_KHREC.png]

"Listen up! Because I ain't gonna repeat myself!"

Glancing back and forth between the two challengers standing on opposite sides of the pitch, Phil raised one arm skyward, "There will be no punching below the belt! No underhanded blows! No hidden weapons! No outside assistance! No mock surrenders! And no, en oh, NO, showboating!"

"Aw, c'mon, Phil."

Hercules couldn't believe his mentor. He shows off for the crowd one time... *one time*... and Phil doesn't stop holding it over his head like the sword of Damocles, "You're not still sore about that, are you?"

"One of these days... ugh..."

The satyr resisted the temptation to pinch the bridge of his nose. Sometimes he wondered when the point was going to get through the kid's skull. Herc wasn't an amateur. Not by a long shot. But the kid was overconfident. Which led to rule number seven - *never* show an opponent your back. Even if you outclass them, or are too exhausted to stand on your feet, turning around in the middle of battle is one of the stupidest things a hero can do. Especially, and he couldn't say it often enough, during the championship match to shatter the previous coliseum record for consecutive victories.

And double especially against someone like Hippolyta.

"Oh! One last rule!"

Jabbing one finger at Sora, then Hercules, the personal trainer cleared his throat with a heavy cough, "As this is an off-the-books match, lethal attacks are forbidden. If *either* of you try going for the jugular, you'll be permanently BANNED from the coliseum faster than Hermes can spill a secret! Got it!?"

"I don't think we're going to kill each other, Phil..."

As the embarrassing memories of that match against Hippolyta faded into the back of his mind, Hercules took advantage of Phil clambering off the pitch to size up Sora. The teen didn't look that special. Gangly. Awkward. Overcompensating for a new weapon by holding it too tightly. Feet spread a little too far apart. Almost as if he picked up that sword off the ground just a few days ago. The lack of coordination was apparent. As were the openings in his stance. Of course, appearances could be deceiving.

Something that he, as a former lanky and uncoordinated teenager with the strength of one hundred men, understood better than anyone.

"But your friends seem to believe you're strong enough to beat me."

Changing the subject with an unwavering grin adorning his chiseled features, he ground his knuckles against callused flesh. Golden light flowed from the depths of his heart. The power flushed throughout his body, illuminating his skin within divine radiance. And inadvertently earning awed outbursts from one of Sora's friends, "Still, I hope you're not expecting me to go easy on you."

"Heh..."

Smirking broadly behind the Keyblade, Sora matched the noble hero's confidence. And then, with Goofy and Donald cheering in the stands, promptly surpassed him, "Time for the *real* star to shine!"

"Well, hey! I haven't heard that boast in quite some time!"

The son of Zeus almost laughed. Instead, he settled on whistling at the unexpected reminder. Maybe Phil hadn't been blowing hot smoke about Sora claiming to know Jecht. The previous champion's string of victories was a little before the kid's time. Back then, watching an average mortal defeating demigods one after another, always bragging about his strength, turned Jecht into a living legend. Only a fluke of fate prevented the guy from outright winning the Game. Which, now that he thought about it, began with that strange woman daring the former champion to an unsanctioned match.

"Alright, Phil!"

Grinning wider than before, Hercules stretched his shoulders, pushing callused fingers into corded and tense muscles, "I think we're ready!"

"ON YOUR MARKS!!! THREE..."

As the satyr's gruff voice echoed far and wide throughout the coliseum, the affable hero bounced on the balls of his feet, small clouds of dust and smoke rising around his sandals.

"... TWO..."

Directly across the pitch, slightly nervous but no less determined to stand victorious against Hercules, Sora redoubled his grip on the Keyblade, spiky hair rustling in the breeze.

"... ONE..."

Up in the stands, Goofy cheered loudly and enthusiastically into Donald's ear.

"... GO!!!"

As the final word finished leaving Phil's mouth, Sora was already sprinting to the left. Light twinkled and shimmered around the

Keyblade resting tightly in his finger. His crown-shaped necklace jingled fervently with every step as he waited for Hercules to make the first move. But then something happened. He heard a faint droning somewhere in the distance. A weird sensation, almost like a familiar voice, whispered against his heart. It caused him to briefly stumble, missing a step before catching his balance. But that brief floundering inadvertently caused him to turn towards Hercules.

Granting him an eerily-close, front-row seat as a sphere of orange-red flames smashed into the unsuspecting hero.

BOOM!!!

The explosion immediately threw Sora off his feet. Burning winds and autumnal light saturated the coliseum as he flew backwards, shoulder slamming against the ground. The deafening *thump* of displaced air sent clouds of dust and smoke soaring into the darkening skies. Shades of red, orange, yellow and even purple filled his vision. The heat felt like the summer sun back home. He could feel his skin sizzling. But when the ringing in his ears dulled to a low drone, pebbles and debris raining from the heavens, Sora took a deep breath and coughed.

"W-What?"

With the Keyblade dragging against the ground as he stumbled back onto his feet, Sora stared into the fading inferno, "W-What just happened?"

"Herc!"

Almost falling over the wall, Phil's heart plummeted to the bottom of his stomach, "Speak to me!"

Plip... plip... plip...

"I'm fine, Phil."

As the flames dissipated and smoke cleared, small droplets of blood impacted the scorched sandstone. One by one, the crimson liquid dripped from Hercules's chin. The lifeblood oozed down his face, trickling from an appreciable gash over his right eyebrow. First-degree burns covered his crossed forearms. Splotches of angry flesh, burnt by the daemonic darkness and heat, stood out against tanned skin. His toga, steam-cleaned and pressed earlier in the morning, was torn, exposing the upper half of his body. And yet, despite looking like he'd underwent several rounds with the Nemean Lion, the infamous hero sounded no worse for wear.

"Geez kid, you tryin' to give me a heart attack?"

Collapsing into the stands with an unceremonious grunt, chest rising and falling as if he'd run a marathon, Phil ignored the adrenaline rushing throughout his body, "Warn me next time you want to pull a stunt like that!"

"Sora..."

Hercules glared skyward, blue eyes slowly and uncharacteristically narrowing, as Phil attempted to calm his enlarged heart before it gave out from the strain, "I'm going to need to take a rain check on our match."

The Keyblade wielder didn't have time to process *what* Hercules meant before inhuman laughter assaulted their hearts.

"Mwa-hahaha!!!"

It took a moment to pinpoint the voice. Sora glanced back and forth, Keyblade at the ready, before, with a sudden and inexplicable gasp, he followed Hercules's line of sight. Hovering above the coliseum was an armored and malevolent figure. Wearing intricate and ornate sky-blue armor, face concealed behind a twin-plumed helmet bordered by horns, spiked golden pauldrons jutting upwards, from which an azure cape fluttered in the phantom wind, the villainous intruder chuckled, sending shivers racing down his spine.

"Perhaps your muscles aren't simply for show."

Jewels and baroque beaded ropes jingled when familiar crimson-orange flames manifested around clawed fingers, **"It would appear I'll need to try a little harder."**

"THUNDAJA!!!"

Unlike the first time, Sora was more than ready.

CRACK-BOOM!!!

As the word of power spilled forth, sending blue-white electricity, crackling more intensely than a hellish firestorm, crossing the vast distance between Donald's staff and the monstrous villain at one-third the speed of light, he slammed his eyes shut and turned away. The tumultuous maelstrom shattered the sound barrier into thousands of infinite pieces. Alongside the accompanying concussive blast, both Goofy and Phil leapt to safety, smaller arcs of lightning bouncing along the coliseum steps. In the pitch, blood-covered fingers pressed against his forehead, Hercules watched, amazed behind belief, as the penultimate spell reached the malefactor's location.

"Humph."

To their collective surprise, a vermilion barrier, hexagonal plates shimmering in the vanishing sunlight, intercepted the crackling magic. For an eternal and agonizingly long moment, it appeared as if the crimson shield was buckling under the massive strain. But much to the short-tempered wizard's shock, enough that his arm fell towards the ground, staff nearly rolling out of his fingers, every lightning bolt suddenly vanished into the strange barrier, leaving nothing behind but tense silence and mocking laughter.

"Your pitiful magic is useless!"

The derision elicited another reciprocal elemental exchange from the enraged court mage. One equally ineffective and pointless. With one hand maintaining the impressive barrier, cape fluttering softly against his boots, the villain's attention slowly, yet inexplicably, shifted targets.

"As for *you*..."

With one hand preoccupied countering the court wizard's useless magic, the villain's other arm snapped forward. Not at the mage. Nor the knight. Or even the mortal hero born of divine origins. Pointing a clawed finger towards the ground as an intricate sigil, magical symbols and interlocking triangles rotating in opposite directions of each other, materialized from the deepest recesses of darkness, the malefactor's unseen mouth curled into an amused smirk.

"Death approach -"

In a burst of physical prowess, bolstered by resolve and heroic determination, Hercules launched himself into the air.

CRACK!!!

The sickening crunch was heard throughout the coliseum and neighboring streets as the hero's knuckles ground into the villain's helmet. Pulling upon every ounce of divinity within his muscles, veins visibly bulging, Hercules clenched his teeth. He reared his arm backwards, knuckles bleeding white from the intense pressure and hit the monstrous figure with everything in his arsenal. It felt like striking hardened orichalcum. Whoever forged the bastard's armor, their skill was comparable to Hephaestus. But even so, sky-blue metal shattered and visibly cracked. The sigil in front of the villain's outstretched hand dissipated into motes of light and darkness.

And as the malefactor's head whipped sideways, shards of metal shimmering in the sunlight, he followed with an overhead, double axe handle, sending the menacing figure crashing to the ground.

BOOM!!!

It felt as if the entire coliseum trembled. Granite, sandstone and marble buckled and warped. The statues above the entrance noticeably tilted. But already on the move, throwing caution to the wind while leaping over Phil, Donald furiously aimed his knotted wooden staff. Without a word, streams of freezing water coalesced around the catalyst. With one eye closed, he drew upon the powerful light inside his heart. And as he pushed *everything* towards the monstrous stranger beginning to recover their senses, another voice, equally powerful, joined in his one-man chorus.

"BLIZZAGA!!!"

"DEEP FREEZE!!!"

As the massive villain staggered back onto their feet, dirt and rubble falling from their shoulders and vengeful darkness clinging to existence itself, twin waves of flowing ice, one larger than the other, simultaneously converged. A deafening *crack* filled the air. The coliseum trembled. And with the Keyblade slightly trembling in his fingers, Sora defiantly glared at the enormous glacier jutting towards the darkening skies, opaque blue-white ice concealing the figure trapped inside its confines.

"Oh man..."

Without another word, he collapsed onto his back, Keyblade vanishing into motes of light, "... that really sucked."

"YEAH! NOW THAT'S WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT!!!"

Tentatively peeking over the wall, frozen water falling onto his head like rain, Phil's caution transformed into unadulterated jubilation, "Way to go! Another notch in your belt!"

"Phil..."

As his student motioned towards Sora and Donald, eyes rolling and blood-covered hands mimicking the 'come on, Phil' gesture he seriously hated from the depths of his gut, the grumpy satyr hesitantly, and with great reluctance, amended his statement. But not of his own volition. Because if anyone found out, especially the other trainers, he'd become the laughingstock of Thebes.

"Alright! *Maybe* I underestimated the pipsqueak. But look at him!"

Furiously jabbing a finger at said wielder of the Keyblade, who, in the time it took for his thoughts to revolve full circle, got back onto his feet, immediately slipped on a thick patch of ice, tripped forward into Donald, accidentally headbutted Goofy before dragging both himself, and his friends, back to the ground.

"Anyone would have made the same call!"

"Sora! Are ya alright?"

"Yeah, I guess so..."

It took Sora a couple of seconds to untangle himself from Donald and Goofy. And even longer for the mortifying embarrassment to fade, "But who was that guy?"

"Who cares!"

Sparing the frozen villain little more than the smallest iota of attention, Donald plucked his hat off the ground, placed it upon his head and scoffed, "Whoever he was, he's finished."

"Maybe..."

Sora absentmindedly nodded along, "But something feels wrong."

"Wrong?"

Rubbing his head, Goofy looked around the coliseum, " Like what?"

"I don't know."

A strange feeling settled into Sora's heart, "It just... doesn't it feel like that guy went down too easily?"

"Bah! You're imagining things!"

The court wizard folded his arms. Sounding, and looking, rather annoyed and peeved. And he was. But truth be told, there was a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. And for good reason. It would have been bad enough if the villain blocked his Thundaja. But absorbing the spell? He couldn't remember *anyone*, not even Merlin, being able of doing something like that. And come to think of it, neither could Lulu or Maleficent or any of the other powerful sorcerers and sorceresses off the top of his head. If he hadn't watched it happen with his own two eyes, he wouldn't have believed something like it was possible.

"Now, come on! Let's get out of -"

"Your celebration is premature, *mage*."

It began with an indistinct crack. One growing louder and increasingly deafening by the second. From within the subzero prison, malevolent laughter sprung forth, severing the temporary reprieve. An audible mockery of their efforts and teamwork before the glacial ice surrounding the heinous malefactor shattered, **"Then again, what can one expect from an acolyte?"**

"Who are you calling an acolyte!?"

"Such a question answers itself."

Clank! Clank! Clank!

The remaining chunks of magical, supercooled ice crunched underneath the figure's boots as they marched through the heavy mist and wispy frost still clinging to the air. Beneath their determined

footsteps, each punctuated by reinforced armored plates angrily sliding against each other, melting glacial ice trickled around miniature crags and canyons. Concentric rings of buckled granite confessing their original point of impact covered the center of the pitch. But the only sign of damage... the only indication Hercules had attacked them... were several cracks and dents on their helmet.

Which slowly swiveled ever-so-slightly beyond the infamous demigod.

"A Keyblade?"

Sora's heart plummeted when the villain's attention focused exclusively on the Keyblade resting in his fingers, **"Then *you* shall be the first to perish!"**

"Phil, get them out of there!"

Rushing across the field before the words finishing leaving his mouth, Hercules shoulder-tackled the monstrous interloper. Sky-blue armor reverberated with a strange hollowness under the point of impact. But instead of the metal crumpling underneath the powerful blow, nothing more than a strangled grunt left the villain's unseen lips. Not even as their heavy greaves left the ground, dust and smoke clinging to their surfaces, and crashed into the stands on the other side of the coliseum from Sora's friends with a sickening *thud*.

"What?"

It took a moment for the weight of that suggestion to sink into the satyr's heart, "But you just sent that bozo flying!"

"There's something different about this guy..."

A blood-covered thumb swiped across the hero's lower lip, removing the faintest trickle of crimson, "And I have the feeling he's still full of surprises."

"An impressive declaration!"

Sora caught the faintest flicker of crimson-purple light inside the smoke and dust before the ironclad monster teleported in front of him and Hercules, **"But it would be quite cowardly for Ryuko Matoi's apprentice to flee the field of battle."**

Shink!

Clawed fingers reached between the shadows, extracting a breathtakingly blue sword from the nothingness between worlds. Adorned with multitudes of ornate jewels, the twin-pronged edge splitting halfway from the hilt and possessing an intricately-crafted guard, the weapon, longer than the Keyblade, rested smoothing within the malefactor's waiting grasp.

"For it was at HER hands that I sampled the sweet delicacy of darkness!"

Clank! Clank! Clank!

"I adored the hatred radiating from her monstrous heart! An eldritch light which brought me closer to death than anyone!"

"Now go..."

In the blink of an eye, the sadistic figure was sprinting across the battlefield. Faster than Hercules could react, quicker than someone his size and bearing heavy armor should have been able to move, he swung downwards, malevolent ecstasy clinging to his existence as Sora, if only at the last moment, attempted to defend himself.

"... to the silent BEYOND!!!"

CLANG!!!

"Hmm?"

Elation disappeared from the baritone malevolence when a circular shield emblazoned with a large, black silhouette of Disney Castle's regalia, intercepted their overhanded strike. With more strength than anticipated, the anthropomorphic dog protecting the Keyblade wielder resisted their efforts. An uncharacteristic seriousness dwelled within those eyes. An expression vowing determination and perseverance until their dying breath as *light*, strong and powerful, exploded from the otherwise normal shield. Allowing the knight, if only for that particular moment, to overwhelm and drive them backwards.

"You stand behind others!?"

CLANK!!!

The villain stumbled but one step before recovering their composure. Unseen eyes narrowed within the pitch-black darkness of their expressionless helmet upon catching sight of a blue sword spiraling away into the stands. But with an annoyed grunt, their hand shot forward, intercepting the approaching Keyblade inches before the legendary weapon reached its intended target.

"How pitiful!"

In the form of violent and chaotic sparks, light and darkness clashed for dominance. But with their hand grasping the Keyblade, chips and flecks of metal corroding underneath blinding light, baritone malevolence snarled, **"The Keyblade doesn't deserve such an inadequate weakling as its master!"**

Indignation swelled within Sora's heart. But before he could say anything, something pushed him backwards. Invisible to the naked eye, the powerful force sent him crashing into Goofy and Donald.

"What if I am weak?"

The Keyblade sank several inches into the ground as Sora staggered to his feet, "That just means I'll need to get stronger!"

A faint shimmer of emerald green light, twinkling particles of deeper green sparkling within the magical radiance, enveloped the young Keyblade wielder. As his fingers tightly grasped the Keyblade, every cut, scrape and wound vanished. The exhaustion vanished from his posture. Nodding first at Donald, then Goofy, before turning to Hercules, who returned his smile with a friendly grin of his own, Sora added, "And maybe I can't get stronger! That's why I have friends! They'll always be there for me! And I'll always be there for them!"

"Absurd!"

With an audible sheen of metal slicing through air, the armored figure's voice twisted into outright mockery as a sapphire blade returned to their grasp, **"Friends? Comrades? A proper master of the Keyblade would disregard such pointless distractions!"**

"WHOA!!!"

"SORA!!!"

As *something* yanked Donald and Goofy off their feet, throwing them into the stands one after another without so much as a warning, Sora's heart plummeted, "Donald! Goofy!"

"You claim friendship grants you strength?"

A heavy *thump* echoing throughout the coliseum as the malevolent villain marched towards Sora and Hercules, **"Let's see how your heart fares against the power of darkness without such baggage! For I, Exdeath, shall leave you as ash upon the breeze!"**

Chapter 12.6

Acceptance: *The past does not define the present. If you wish to reminisce, ensure you are not caught in the relentless tides of memories.*

~Satsuki Kiryuin~

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/8/89/EP16-05_Satsuki_Kiryuin.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140512193856]

She accepted the weariness biting at her heart.

The tranquility clinging to the darkness offered a moment's respite. A small comfort, if she could admit, from her normal duties. The sheer *emptiness* helped clear her mind of further distractions. And she saw. Stretching before her eyes, wrapping around her Gummi Ship, shimmering bands of purples, greens and blues, various other colors momentarily manifesting before simultaneously ceasing to exist, introduced some measure of childish wonder to her heart. Ribbons, nebulae and aurora, crisscrossing the vast darkness, phantasmal pinpoints of false light, granted perspective.

It truly was an ocean between worlds.

A midnight sea of incomprehensible darkness stretching beyond the edges of reality. And lurking underneath the surface, silently waiting for the next naive traveler to foolishly lower their guard, Heartless waited, seeking hearts without purpose. Without reason. Simply because they *must*. She didn't need to sense their presence. Not when she could see them out there, floating around shattered planetoids.

Thousands - no, millions - of malformed and twisted representations of the darkness dwelling within the hearts of humanity.

Yet with her right leg crossed over her left, fingers folded across her lap, Satsuki Kiryuin closed her eyes and dreamt.

Don't Lose Your Heart

"What can you tell me about Ryuko?"

Her long-sleeved blouse, white as the winter storm raging beyond the castle walls, clung to the armchair. The fabric shifted against crinkling leather as she lowered the empty teacup onto the table. The bitter liquid, long since drained, stained its porcelain interior. But contrary to whatever the swordswoman expected, she confessed nothing. Her expression settled into an emotionless mask, betraying nothing. And only when another log, half-splintered and nearly burnt to ashes, shattered in the hearth, sending embers roaring up the chimney, did she acquiesce.

"Why do you wish to know?"

Straddling the armchair perched across the table, one leg crossed over the other, calloused fingers pressing against her cheek, Beatrix's purple-red eye narrowed, "Can't a master ask about her student?"

"Of course."

Conceding the master's point with an imperceptibly insulted scoff, she folded her hands together and answered the question with one of her own, "But if you're so curious about my sister, why not ask Ryuko herself? Unless, of course, you already have an answer."

"Hmm... very good."

Beyond the snow-covered windows, ice and frost creeping along the transparent surfaces akin to living spiderwebs, the blizzard

momentarily intensified, sending howling gusts beating against Alexandria Castle. The light from the hearth wasn't powerful. Not compared to the heat and warmth arbitrating their conversation. But with a pleasant smile graces the edges of her lips, Beatrix closed her eye, bangs of chestnut brown hair falling across the eyepatch covering the right side of her face.

"I suppose further wordplay would be insulting."

Something clung to the master's confession. A peculiar, unexpected emotion. Enough that she, for a moment, quirked an eyebrow, morbid curiosity manifested within the depths of her heart. Yet she listened, expression unchanging and posture stiffening, when the Keyblade Master's attention shifted towards the crackling flames, sending hues of red, orange and yellow dancing across her face.

"The truth is, I've always known Ryuko was different."

With those words, the master's eye swiveled away from the crackling flames, "Special, in her own way."

"Aren't we all?"

Nary an emotion graced her somber features. But underneath the exterior of her heart, where not even Beatrix's excellent perception could penetrate, an impenetrable castle crafted years ago, concern and apprehension reared their ugly heads. A hydra of unwanted emotions. Something that caused her jawline, if only briefly, to tense, "I wield light as naturally as one breathes. You possess the only weapon capable of destroying Heartless. Steiner can imbue his blade with elemental magic. Lulu's apprentice can summon remnants of worlds to fight at her side. Suffice to say, Ryuko isn't that special."

"I would prefer you not insult my intelligence."

On the wall besides the bookcase, tomes and volumes filling its shelves, an antique clock, wood carved into the shape of an ancient

airship, relentlessly ticked.

"Satsuki, I understand your reluctance. And why you wish to protect Ryuko."

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

"Which is why I'm asking you, not as Ryuko's master, but her friend."

The master's tone softened as her gaze found itself drawn towards the rose-colored blade hanging above the hearth's mantel.

"From the moment Yen Sid spoke of a young woman no older than Eraqus's eldest students standing against Ardyn Lucis Caelum, placing everything above her own safety, I'd intended accepting Ryuko as my student. Nothing since that evening has changed my mind. Or sewn doubt into my heart. I'm *proud* to have trained Ryuko. Whatever weakness her heart might possess, she stood against two of the greatest threats to the Realm of Light since the Keyblade War. Not for power. Or prestige. But to protect her friends. And what little family she found."

In that unbearably suffocating silence, possessing a heavy weight beyond all measure, Beatrix pulled her hand away from her cheek.

But her gaze lingered on the Keyblade a few seconds longer. She tracked every mote of dust illuminated by the writhing flames. Could she have interrupted? Perhaps. She knew what the swordswoman wanted to know. Yet not once did she contemplate opening her mouth.

Genuine respect and admiration held her tongue silent.

"If there's anything you can say, you have my word it won't leave this room. No matter what it may be."

She took a silent breath, emotions slipping through the widening cracks in the fortress surrounding her heart.

"Very well..."

Straightening her posture, she uncrossed her legs, faded white jeans and blouse burning in the flickering light, "You could say Ryuko inherited her... distinctiveness... from our mother."

"Your mother?"

In the deepest recesses of her heart, something egregious stirred. Long-cooled hatred, forgotten through both victory and time, erupted into temporary relevance. And for the briefest of moments, her memories turned introspective. She was once more eighteen. A young woman defiantly against an abomination guised as human. The heiress of Souichiro Kiryuin's final parting secrets. Those maroon eyes boring into her soul. That sadistic smile promising endless misery. She remembered everything. And her brow furrowed. Steel-blue eyes hardened.

"Yes. Ragyo Kiryuin."

Yet stoic ambivalence concealed her innermost thoughts and tumultuous emotions from the Keyblade Master. Her dispassionate expression was marred by the slightest of hiccups when the foul locution, something she'd wished never again utter, clung to her tongue, heavy and thick, "Our parents underwent a less than amiable separation when I was five. Out of genuine concern for her wellbeing, our father raised Ryuko. I, on the other hand, remained under our mother's sole care."

"A divorce?"

"No.

She shook her head, "It's nowhere near that simple."

The warmth from the hearth fought against the hyperborean winter seeking entrance through cracks in the walls and windows. For an agonizing moment, she hovered over the edge of oblivion. Stretching

into the infinite horizon, an abyss of swirling darkness awaited. Perhaps, at one point, she might have hesitated. Or, at the least, contemplated whether or not such a decision was appropriate. Yet without hesitation, four horrendous words passed through her lips.

"La vie est drôle."

Beatrix's remaining eye narrowed at the foreign language, "What does that mean?"

"It roughly means 'life is amusing.'"

An entire lifetime ago, she'd dedicated everything - heart, body and soul - towards atoning for Ragyo Kiryuin's sins. Some too heinous to contemplate. Hundreds of millions of dollars spent revitalizing the world economy. Billions loaned to countries to rebuild infrastructure after the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet's destruction. She would have done anything to pay for the incomprehensible crimes her mother committed in absolute and unthinking servitude to Life Fibers.

But upon the cusp of achieving some measure of reparation, the Heartless appeared.

And everything ended.

Not with a bang, but with a whimper.

"I was six years old when I first heard those words."

Interlacing her fingers squarely in the center of her lap, she glowered, hardened eyes slowly narrowing, "I was studying with my private tutor when my mother summoned me to her office. An industrial spy employed by one of few remaining competitors to the Revocs Corporation was caught breaking into the Research and Development Division. As her daughter and sole heiress, she wished for me to observe what happens to those who believe themselves worthy of our family's secrets."

Another log shifted in the fireplace.

"I've never forgotten his pleas for mercy. How he begged for his life. And Ragyo Kiryuin's amusement at such an impudent request."

"La vie est drôle. There's no need to beg. After all, in but a few moments, you'll be with your wife and daughter."

She allowed those words to settle without further provocation in the swordswoman's heart.

"*That* is the reason Ryuko doesn't like talking about our family."

There were many things she hated about Ragyo Kiryuin. Far too many to count. She could recall every horrendous action. Every disturbing touch. That monstrous smile. The words of feigned comfort concealing malevolence. Yet never, not once, did her voice rise beyond calm inflection, "Because our mother was a phenomenally evil woman. A monster who viewed humanity as nothing more than livestock to be fattened and slaughtered. Whose relentless greed and ambition nearly destroyed the world. For all intents and purposes, Ragyo Kiryuin was more of a monster than Ardyn Lucis Caelum."

"That's... quite the explanation."

It was an exceptionally honest answer. One confessing genuine surprise. But the underlying meaning, what Beatrix truly meant, didn't escape notice. Yet she couldn't fault the master's hesitation. Ardyn Lucis Caelum had been an exceptionally dangerous threat. A monster who gave himself over to darkness so thoroughly he couldn't be killed, merely sealed beneath Lindblum's Grand Castle. A false assumption, in retrospect, considering Ryuko's accomplishment in the Keyblade Graveyard. But one born from experience.

"You don't believe me?"

Before the question finished leaving her mouth, the master shook her head, chestnut brown hair bouncing against her face, "No. I have no reason to doubt your words. It's simply..."

"... hard to fathom?"

"You could say that, yes."

A faint sigh passed through her lips. Now it made sense. Beatrix was attempting to wrap her heart around the truth. The evidence clinging to her words like a remora. But apprehension and disbelief prevented the Keyblade Master from discarding doubt. After all, how could anyone, even someone like Ragyo Kiryuin, compare with Ardyn Lucis Caelum, a beast whose crimes and actions were known thousands of years after his original imprisonment?

"Ragyo Kiryuin was incomprehensibly powerful. Stronger than you can imagine. She was, in essence, as close to unstoppable as anyone could be. It required countless sacrifices and sheer luck for Ryuko to take her down before our world shattered underneath her metastasizing madness."

The older woman's purple-reddish eye hardened.

"Ryuko killed your mother?"

She shook her head, rejecting the question without consideration.

"Ragyo Kiryuin committed suicide rather than accept defeat."

An unnatural coldness trickled into her heart, "At least, we presumed she killed herself."

"Explain."

The emphasis on that single, authoritative *demand*, a word possessing incredible weight, almost caught her by surprise. It brooked no argument. And promised consequences for any thoughts of disobedience. She was no longer sitting across from Ryuko's

teacher. The same woman who teleported her sister several feet above Alexandria Castle's moat in retaliation for dumping oglops in Steiner's chambers. No, this was the Keyblade Master who single-handedly demolished an army of ten thousand Heartless *after* sacrificing her right arm driving back the Cloud of Darkness.

"Ryuko never said *who* she fought in Twilight Town, did she?"

She answered without equivocation, furrowed brows matching the master's unwavering expression, "Of course she didn't. After all, Nui Harime killed herself long ago."

"Nui Harime?"

If the swordswoman was surprised by the peculiar name, she concealed her emotions remarkably well. Which made sense. Much like herself, Ryuko purposely refused to speak about their world. It was a point of contention. Something neither of them, for differing reasons, wished to remember. But for all intents and purposes, Nui Harime meant absolutely nothing to the Keyblade Master. And why would it? Beatrix never encountered the Grand Couturier once Ragyo Kiryuin personally deemed someone a threat to Life Fibers. She never had the misfortune of experience her superhuman strength. And the insanity lying behind that insidious smile.

"One of our mother's most devoted followers. She was a self-proclaimed artiste. The Grand Couturier of Revocs. And an unrepentant, sociopathic monster who murdered our father."

Halfway through the Grand Couturier's abridged background, most of the unnecessary and cruel details cast to the wayside, she reclined against the chair, thick bangs of waist-length hair curling around her blouse.

"At my mother's request, she ended her own life. In front of Ryuko and myself, Nui Harime severed her own head."

"Yet she survived?"

"I think Ryuko derived pleasure actually *killing* her this time."

The unintended animosity in her answer must have surprised Beatrix. Because the Keyblade Master's posture stiffened as she leaned backwards, taut muscles resting uncomfortably against leather, "I see... and are you certain - absolutely certain - Ryuko took down Nui Harime? You said so yourself. This... Grand Couturier... already faked her death once. She might have done so again."

"I asked Ryuko that very question."

A soft chime momentarily drew her attention to the antique clock arbitrating their conversation. "You *cannot* imagine how much Ryuko and Nui Harime loathed each other. But make no mistake. I do have my reservations. And will continuing having them until proven otherwise. But if there's anyone Ryuko wouldn't stop fighting until they were reduced to nothing more than dust scattered upon the four winds, it would be Nui Harime."

As if responding to her continued utterance of the Grand Couturier's name, a piece of half-burnt kindling in the hearth shattered, sending flames roaring up the chimney. And sitting with her hands folded across her lap, fingers interlaced and thumbs rubbing against one another, her eyes slowly narrowed as an awful taste swelled in the back of her throat.

"Of course, this raises an important question."

"Your mother."

"Yes."

A single eye narrowed, "I'm afraid this isn't something I can keep secret."

"Understandable."

She exhaled, resignation biting at her heart. She couldn't argue with the master's decision. Even if she wished to argue, it wouldn't accomplish anything. The *possibility* Ragyo Kiryuin survived tearing out her heart and dissolving into Life Fibers was more than enough to discard any promises of secrecy. Such was the threat posed by someone who gave themselves over to Life Fibers. But independent of that acceptance, Satsuki pushed herself onto her feet, leather crinkling as her fingers clenched against the armrests.

"Do what you must. I only ask you not tell Ryuko."

Uttering the profane locution that was Ragyo Kiryuin's cursed name forced her to recall every vivid detail. To remember that fallacious grin concealing infinite darkness and monstrous intentions. And yet, despite burdened by memories capable of driving lesser individuals insane, her posture didn't wilt. She shed not a single tear. Her façade was emotionless, bereft of sorrow and self-pity as she marched towards the door, heeled boots *clanking* against polished hardwood.

"Not until I have proof Ragyo Kiryuin survived."

Clack!

"Ryuko is not a Kiryuin. *I am.*"

As those decisive words, possessing gravitas greater than the blizzard raging against Alexandria, passed through her lips, Satsuki swiveled upon a worn heel, once more staring straight into Beatrix's eye.

"It is *my* duty to atone for our family's innumerable sins. Not hers."

The flickering light radiating from the hearth, oranges and yellows cooling into crimson, darkened, highlighting the sheer hatred and rage dwelling within her heart.

"No matter how long it takes, *I* shall be the one who drives the Scissor Blades through Ragyo Kiryuin's blackened heart!"

Don't Lose Your Heart

"... Satsuki?"

The dream morphed into a pastiche of surrealism, memories and emotions blurring together.

"Satsuki, are you there?"

Eyes fluttering open, allowing reality to reestablish itself unto her consciousness, she sighed. A modest exhale concealing the weight of her vanishing dream. What could have caused her heart to reminisce about such distant memories? She didn't know. But someone was contacting her. Someone familiar. A voice she'd recognize anywhere, even stumbling on the verge of death. With hints of exhaustion still clinging to her mind, Satsuki reached towards the controls, one finger lightly pressing a button off-center and above the central display.

"What is it, Inumuta?"

She heard the former Information and Strategy Committee Chair of the Honnouji Academy's Student Council, now chief programmer and data analyst for Scrooge McDuck, grumbling across the audio-only connection, "I've been trying to contact you for several minutes. I was beginning to presume the Bahamut's external communication systems was experiencing an unexpected malfunction. But the diagnostics look clear on my end. Is everything alright?"

"I'm fine."

Her lips imperceptibly quirked at the sarcasm accompanying Inumuta's query, "I presume you've found something?"

"Perhaps. Then again, perhaps not."

On the other end of the interstellar connection, white lab coat unbuttoned over a teal sweater, collar high enough to conceal his mouth, Houka Inumuta's glasses reflected the bright glow radiating from the customized computers, surrounding advanced equipment and state-of-the-art servers. All of which belonged to Scrooge McDuck. The duck was *wealthy*. Perhaps not as much as Satsuki's mother. Or more. It didn't really matter. When talking about hundreds of billions of dollars in the same tone as discussing the weather, the argument became moot.

"But for the record..."

A final series of keystrokes brought up a three-dimensional layered-mesh image of Ryuko Matoi's current appearance, right down to her Keyblade, "... Matoi's currently tracking down Gilgamesh upon a world called... let's see... ah, yes, Agrabrah. Is that correct?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

Pressing a finger against his glasses, Inumuta pushed them up the bridge of his nose. He needed to thank Matoi. Metaphorically, of course. He'd never actually do it. Not that he could not appreciate her efforts. She was a valued comrade, Satsuki's sister and a wielder of the Keyblade. One of only a handful of warriors preventing the Heartless from overrunning the universe. And rescued him from that god-awful, backwards world without the slightest hint of technology.

But he'd never express gratitude.

Not after she accidentally - in her words - threw Threadcutter through his laptop.

"I'm still analyzing the data, but it seems someone resembling your sister was spotted on another world. A most peculiar development, wouldn't you agree?"

Satsuki released a staggered breath, "Mognet Central claimed an individual bearing resemblance to Gilgamesh was attempting to

sneak off-world. Perhaps he succeeded."

"Or he betrayed your sister in the most over-the-top, comical manner possible," Inumuta countered, sarcasm accompanying the observation, "You *do* remember Arendelle?"

"I do..."

She did, in fact, remember Arendelle. Quite clearly. And with noticeable annoyance and mortifying embarrassment, "Upload the world's coordinates to the Bahamut. I'll look into it."

"Very well. Sending over the coordinates now."

"Thank you, Inumuta."

Silence resumed its incessant hold upon her Gummi Ship when Inumuta ended the connection. It left her with nothing more than her thoughts for company. Leaning forward as rows upon rows of red numbers, metaphysical values beyond normal mathematics, information which would have left intellectuals on their old world baffled and speechless, scrolled down the central display, Satsuki grasped the Bahamut's controls.

And with a soft yet noticeable *pulse* as the engines kicked into overdrive, the Gummi Ship vanished, leaving behind nothing more than fading streams of emerald light.

Last edited: May 6, 2019

Chapter 12.7

Acknowledgement: *The only thing that matters is your heart! Who you chose to be! Everything else is useless bullshit!*

~Ryuko Matoi~

[img:

https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/finalfantasy/images/6/61/FFXIV_Exdeath_01.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/1000?cb=20170704124637]

"... did anyone get the number of that gummi ship..."

Donald hadn't the slightest clue what happened. Or what hit them. As everything came back into focus, chocobos, moogles and moombas dancing before his eyes, he groaned. Then pushed Goofy's boot off his stomach. The last thing he could remember was standing up to that obnoxious cliché of a bombastic villain with *serious* firepower when something yanked them backwards. Then nothing. But judging by the familiar indent on Goofy's shield, he knew *why* he had a migraine.

That just left...

"Sora!"

Without bothering to rouse Goofy into consciousness, something far easier said than done, he untangled himself from the slumbering knight. There was no time to waste. Especially when Sora needed their help! Because almost as if tempting fate, Exdeath's mocking condescension sent shivers down his spine. And the unmistakable clashing of metal against metal pushed him into action.

Gathering as much remaining mana as possible, enough that his feathers sizzled from the immeasurable heat, Donald closed one

eye, carefully aimed his staff at the malevolent villain and squawked at the top of his lungs.

"FIRAGA!!!"

Only for the magical fireballs to ricochet against the previously invisible barrier surrounding the field.

"Hey! Watch it!"

Phil suppressed the indigestion, heartburn and mortification rearing their ugly heads like a three-headed hydra as he dove to the floor, flames and curling embers raining throughout the stands. And then he heard *it* fall. One of the wizard's fireballs destroyed the ankles of the leftmost statue standing guard over the coliseum's entrance. An expensive and valuable statue commissioned by Poseidon of his son, Bellerophon. The demigod who slayed the chimera. One of the greatest heroes this side of Crete until Herc came along. And as that very said sculpture collapsed into bits and pieces of rubble somewhere outside the coliseum, he cautiously stood back on his hooves.

"You tryin' to blow this place apart?"

A snort, followed by a confused grumble, brought the knight awakening into reality to the satyr's attention, "That statue was more valuable than your lives!"

"Who care about some stupid statue!"

Donald meant every word. He couldn't care less about some piece of stupid artwork, "We have to help Sora!"

"Why you... son of a blasted..."

Another *boom* rocked the coliseum when Hercules attempted to punch - or really, more of an incredibly winding haymaker - Exdeath through the nearest wall only for the malevolent sorcerer to teleport

out of the way faster than Narcissus became entranced by his own reflection.

"Alright! Fine!"

Caught between annoyance and resignation, Phil clomped up the stairs, mindful of errant magical attacks and falling debris. As much as it pained him, the duck had a point. Not that he'd admit anything. He couldn't remember the last bastard who gave Herc a run for his money, let alone actually wounded the kid. Which was bad. Real bad. Bad in the sense there was the distinct possibility the fates were paying *real close* attention.

"But *don't* think about asking me to lend a hand, got it!?"

Goofy mulled over Phil's refusal before frowning.

Now wasn't the time to argue.

Every second wasted *thinking* about the problem was another second they weren't helping Sora.

"Hold on, Sora!"

Hefting Donald and Phil onto his shoulders, both of whom immediately protested getting carried like luggage, the chivalrous knight sprinted up the stands, "We're comin' to help!"

"Your friend sounds concerned."

It wasn't an insult. Nor mockery.

Merely blunt observation.

"Perhaps he lacks faith in your strength."

Exdeath paid little attention to the charging hero nor the anthropomorphic creatures fleeing into the coliseum. Glowing eyes, concealed within the thick darkness encompassing the abyssal void

of his cracked helm, focused not upon the lesser beings, but the singular youth's desperate struggle against inevitable entropy.

"Humph!"

Once again, he teleported at the last possible instance, graciously avoiding another life-ending punch.

"You're beginning to annoy me."

Before the hero, frozen mid-flight with one arm extending into a bone-shattered punch, realized what happened, a hand grabbed his ankle. Daemonic fingers dug into bare flesh. And in that same otherwise insignificant instant of time, Exdeath pivoted on his back foot despite floating several inches above the ground. Then, at the apex of his momentum, released Hercules, sending him crashing through wall after wall before eventually reaching Thebes itself.

"Not even history will remember him."

CLANG!!!

Sora didn't know *how* he knew Exdeath was going to teleport behind him. He'd been so focused on watching Hercules getting thrown through the wall that when Exdeath disappeared into thin air, he should have been surprised. But he wasn't. Maybe it was instinct. Or reflexes. But whatever the reason, even if it was nothing more than luck, he swung the Keyblade as the villain reemerged from the darkness lurking between worlds.

"Oh?"

Surprise clung to Exdeath's existence, granting the menacing figure a most disturbing silhouette against the fading sunlight, as his immeasurably deep voice confessed the barest hints of genuine interest at the Keyblade intercepting his jeweled claymore.

"It would appear you possess *some* strength after all."

"S-Shut... u-up..."

Everything faded into the background, replaced by white noise and silence. Sparks of different colors, yellows and pinks and purples and even blues, spun away from his Keyblade as it struggled against Exdeath's strength. The guy was on an entirely different level than the Heartless. He didn't know how much longer he could keep this up. But even so, desperately holding onto the Keyblade with one hand and the other propped against the weapon's shaft, Sora refused to give up, even as the world twisted into shades of grey, black and crimson.

And just like that, reality *stopped*.

It felt like he was swimming through a dream.

He couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't so much as blink.

But he saw the strangest threads surrounding Exdeath.

Threads the color of the setting sun.

"Mwa-hahahaha!"

Exdeath's laughter yanked him back to reality.

"Good! Very good!"

SHING-BOOM!!!

Sora knew the monster had been holding something back. He wasn't naïve. Jecht had pounded that lesson into his and Riku's skulls long ago. But when Exdeath pushed harder against the Keyblade, it was accompanied by a burst of purplish darkness that stung his heart. And faster than he could react, let alone move, the Keyblade spun out of his fingers, gold and silver shimmering against the sunlight. Time slowed to a crawl as he watched the legendary weapon land somewhere in the stands, far out of reach. His eyes widened. Dread pounded in his chest.

Right before Exdeath's grasping fingers latched around his throat.

"But what will you do *now*?"

With absolutely no effort, the boasting villain hefted the struggling youth several feet off the ground, **"This is the part where you pull a new trick out of your sleeve. Something that turns the battle in your favor. But think quickly. If you don't figure something out, you'll die."**

He deliberately pressed the cyan claymore's razor-sharp edge against the boy's heart, basking in the unadulterated fear burning in those blue eyes.

"Nothing?"

The question lingered for what felt like an eternity before Exdeath derisively discarded Sora to the wayside, **"A pointless waste of time."**

Clank! Clank! Clank!

Every step carried the weight of approaching death. As the youth recovered his bearings, each gasping breath accompanied by retching coughs, darkness writhing around the stalking villain. It devoured the sunlight. It twisted the deepening colors into various purples and reds. And upon taking that final step, Exdeath's weapon of choice shimmered violently against the fading sunlight akin to a hovering guillotine.

"I expected more from Ryuko Matoi's apprentice!"

CRUNCH!!!

In the immediate moment preceding his return, Hercules *soared* through the smoking hole in the coliseum. Adrenaline coursed through his veins. Oxygen poured between clenched teeth, blood trickling from the corners of his mouth. Golden light brighter than the

midday sun covered every inch of his body, gifting him the strength of Olympus. Shimmering motes of divinity infused his flushed skin, illuminating his existence within brilliant amber.

One final step brought him face to face with Exdeath, the villain's head only beginning to turn in his direction.

And with his arm cocked backwards, bicep, triceps and deltoids bulging from restraint, he smashed his white-knuckled fist straight into the surprised monster's stomach.

[CRUNCH!!!](#)

The sound reverberated throughout the coliseum. A sharp, deafening *bang* echoing to the furthest corners of Thebes.

Something so fantastically quick nobody, not even Exdeath, was aware it happened until it did, in fact, *happen*.

Not even as the demigod's punch launched him off the ground, cracks spiderwebbing across sky-blue armor, straight through his own magical barrier and into the stands.

"Sora!"

Smoke drifted from the hero's trembling knuckles. A small dollop of blood trickled down his fingers. He gasped for breath, shoulders rising and falling. But not at all concerned by his own wounds, grievous as they might be, Hercules turned away from the crater billowing smoke into the darkness, "Are you alright?"

"Y-Yeah."

Another round of coughing made it impossible for Sora to stand. It took everything just to answer Heracles. Nevertheless, he forced a half-cocked smirk. A smile that didn't look at all confident. Relief that didn't quite reach his eyes as he pushed himself off the ground,

everything briefly swaying before reality snapped into focus, "I-I'm fine. Thanks for -"

"You can thank me later. Right now, you need to get out of here."

He *felt* the strengthening darkness long before the plumes of rising smoke and dust dissipated. A few rocks roughly the size of his fists tumbled down the stands, bouncing awkwardly along the way. An intense silence overpowered everything, allowing the demigod to hear his own quickening pulse, "Find your friends and Phil! Get as far away from here as possible!"

Sora opened his mouth to say something, anything, as the Keyblade felt increasingly heavy.

Only for a guttural snarl to interrupt his efforts.

"Impudent whelp!"

Gravel, rubble and various-sized pieces of debris cascaded off Exdeath as one hand latched around the jagged edges of the massive crater. Unencumbered by the multitude of cracks spreading across the front of his armor, nor physically incapacitated by the punch which should have knocked most people into a concussive stupor - or worse, liquified their innards into a fine paste - he grasped the cyan blade lying but a few feet away, clawed fingers clenching its detailed handle with renewed fervor, **"Don't you know when to give up?"**

"Sorry..."

The slightest hint of annoyance clung to Hercules's heart as he sprinted down the pitch, planted one foot against the wall separating the spectators from the fighters and launched himself towards Exdeath, "... but true heroes don't know the meaning of giving up!"

"Is that so?"

Exdeath's sheer malevolence, sadism dripping from every chuckle, sent shivers racing down Sora's spine when his empty hand snapped forward. In the split-second between Hercules launching himself off the ground and everything *changing*, a purple sigil manifested. Various symbols, hieroglyphics and strange letters materializing inches from the villain's splayed fingers.

"Then allow me to rectify your stupidity!"

WHUMP!!!

"Gravijas."

Without warning, Hercules slammed face-first into the stands, every bone and muscle creaking from the immense pressure, when gravity, localized entirely on his location, multiplied fivefold... tenfold... and finally, twentyfold. The sudden gravitas forced the air from his lungs. Sweat trickled down his face only to crash like arrows against trembling stone underneath his fingers. He gasped for breath. But gnashing his teeth, he propped one forearm underneath his chest. Using every ounce of his strength, he forced himself onto one knee, and then onto his feet, stumbling briefly before recovering his balance.

Every movement was a tremendously difficult and herculean labor.

Yet it didn't prevent him from noticing the cyan blur swinging downwards.

Squelch!

"HERCULES!!!"

Plip... plip... plip...

Drop by drop, blood pooled around his sandals.

Spittle and blood trickling from his lips.

The blade stabbed through his right shoulder shifted forward another inch, sending waves of agony throughout his body.

Plip... plip... plip...

"Like I said..."

Plip... plip... plip...

With a determined grin stretching across his face, Hercules grasped one hand around the blood-covered claymore.

Plip... plip... plip...

"True heroes..."

Metal, no matter how well forged or tempered, even by the hands of Hephaestus himself, had physical limits. Steel bent. Iron shattered. And the strange material composing Exdeath's particular weapon audibly groaned as his grip tightened. And tightened. And tightened. A keening scream colder than the wails of the dead as cracks formed underneath his fingertips.

"Just DIE already!!!"

For the first time, something resembling nervousness radiated from Exdeath. Intending on ending the hero's life once and for all, the omnicidal monster fervently grasped his claymore with both hands and *pushed*, desperate to drive the blade further into the wounded warrior. But Hercules, despite gritting his teeth at the torturous pain, countered his efforts.

And with a noticeable struggle, blood and visceral dripping onto the ground in thick and nauseating dollops, he steadily removed the weapon one agonizing inch at a time.

Plip... plip... plip...

"... don't know the meaning of giving up!"

"Foolish ape..."

Exdeath grappled against the demigod's supernatural strength. Hatred clung to his heart. And bolstered not only by the darkness defining his existence, but also the hero's grievously wounded right arm, incapable of even the slightest motion, he reversed Hercules's slow advance into a quivering stalemate, **"... your godly strength won't rescue you from darkness's embrace!"**

"HEAL!!!"

Waves of unexpected rejuvenation swept throughout his body alongside Sora's desperate declaration. And with it, Hercules *felt* the pain abating. The excruciating agony transforming his nerves into a cacophony faded until he could once more think. And with clarity of mind, he yanked out the remaining four inches of sky-blue metal.

"Thanks Sora..."

Blood momentarily gushed from the suddenly open wound. A last gasp of mocking pain before soothing emerald light partially regenerated damaged flesh and bone. It wasn't enough to fix everything. But debilitating pain faded into comfortable numbness. And more important, sensation returned to his right arm.

"... I guess this means I owe you one!"

The sound of his knuckles cracking filled the void left empty by Exdeath's shock. And clenching said hand into a trembling fist, tendons and muscles bulging beneath his skin, Hercules swung in a wide arc towards the malefactor's concealed face.

"Nice try!"

Retreating into the darkness between worlds once it became abundantly clear he couldn't overpower the demigod, Exdeath reluctantly discarded his sword, which said hero promptly shattered. But as Hercules staggered sideways, startled by the unexpected lack

of resistance awaiting his powerful swing, he reappeared on the opposite side of the coliseum, mocking laughter confessing his return.

"But futile!"

It would have been trivial - no, appropriate - to press the advantage. Instead, Exdeath marched down the decimated spectator stands, each heavy footstep echoing ominously within the deafening silence. He was no fool. The boy might have restored some of the hero's strength. But in the grand scheme, Hercules remained upon death's door. And heroes *always* manifested their greatest feats when hovering on the boundary between life and death.

"In the end, all shall fall against my might!"

Another weapon, a strange combination of a sword and staff, woven together into a cacophony of curves and edges, purplish-pink instead of sky-blue, materialized in the malefactor's waiting grasp, **"Starting with -"**

A Keyblade spun towards his helmet before he could finish.

Clang!

"Humph!"

Exdeath sneered at the Keyblade spiraling into the distance before turning towards the boy, now bereft of any means to defend himself, **"And what was that meant to -"**

In a burst of shimmering gold and white, Sora grasped the Keyblade as it returned from wherever it landed. And with the keychain jingling against his jacket, more than aware of the villain's growing darkness, he stepped forward, planted one foot against the ground and threw the Keyblade a second time, light trailing in its wake.

Clang!

"Will you..."

Clang!

"... stop doing..."

Clang!

"... that ridiculous..."

Clang!

"... ATTACK!!!"

At the exact moment Sora's Keyblade left his fingers for the seventh time, guided by the teenager's heart straight towards Exdeath, Hercules leapt across the coliseum, one arm pulled backwards, muscles and tendons bulging. But instead of knuckles solidly connecting with cyan metal, they slammed against a magical barrier spontaneously forming several inches in front of Exdeath's outstretched palm. A collision - flesh against reinforced magic - echoing far and wide across Thebes.

"Did you *really* think that would work?"

Before finishing his mocking insult, Exdeath retreated into the void between worlds. A dimension parallel yet perpendicular to reality. A realm of pure darkness where those unwilling or unable to harness their rage and hatred were consumed by the shadows. And in the blink of an eye, once more emerging into the light, the boy's Keyblade spinning through where he'd been standing but a moment prior, Exdeath thrust his blade towards the unsuspecting hero's backside.

"Now perish!"

Hercules didn't think.

Instead of turning around, he smashed his elbow against Exdeath's solar plexus. Solid bone and godly strength focused to a single, devastatingly sharp point.

CRACK!!!

As the unmistakable groaning of mystically-reinforced metal buckling underneath the strain of an enraged demigod's physical prowess echoed throughout emptied corridors and off cracked walls, Exdeath reached towards Hercules, purple-black magical crackling between splayed fingers, **"Insolent ape! How dare you! Gra -"**

An uppercut shattered the amalgamated magic moments away from twisting gravity into a chaotic and lethal maelstrom.

The subsequent jab sent Exdeath crashing to the field.

A faux short straight-punch after ducking around the purplish-pink weapon shooting towards his heart slammed the sorcerer into the nearest wall.

A jaw-shattering haymaker further drove the villain through solid rock.

And one final powerful cross, shoulders locked and muscles visibly bulging beneath his skin, accompanied knuckles tearing through the villain's breastplate.

Only to feel *nothing* inside.

"Surprised?"

Before the astonished hero could begin to consider thinking about, let alone answering, the question, daemonic fingers latched around his face.

"My turn!"

An intricate sigil manifested around Exdeath's outstretched hand.

"Firaja!"

KA-BOOM!!!

The explosion almost knocked Sora off his feet. Flames burning hotter and brighter than the sun blasted forth. A never-ending stream of fire. The heat beat against his face. His lungs stung. His throat burned. The sheer force of the magical attack pushed him backwards. And once it was finally over, he caught a glimpse of the devastation. Solid marble melted into thick waves of glass. Granite pulverized into scattering ashes. Smoke rose from the massive hole stretching through the stands and out the other side of the coliseum.

"H-Hercules?"

Sora couldn't move.

He couldn't breathe as the Keyblade almost fell from his numb fingers.

"Hmph! Even gods themselves fall against the darkness! Now..."

Exdeath's malevolence was infectious. A darkness seeking to snuff out and extinguish any traces of surrounding light. And when he turned around, boldly standing before the remaining source of resistance, his laughter hardened, **"... it's just you."**

"Guess again."

"WHAT!?"

It was bewilderment, pure and simple. Unadulterated surprise. A declaration containing absolute shock reverberated within his helm when a pair of forearms, each thicker than most human's thighs, wrapped around his shoulders, **"You? But how?"**

"Surprised?"

His skin flushed gold from the divine aura radiating from his heart, first and second-degree burns covering most of his exposed skin and the upper half of his toga reduced to tattered fragments, Hercules leaned backwards, pulling the monster into an unescapable full-nelson, "You're not the first to try that trick!"

"Then allow me to improvise!"

Whatever modicum of victory was establish quickly shattered into nothingness when the armored monster's sword-staff responded to his command. It spun out of his fingers, moving in a tight and deadly arc through the air, crimson light shimmering along its razor-sharp edge as it descended towards the occupied hero's exposed spine.

CLANG!!!

It felt like a waking dream. As he rushed to save Hercules from Exdeath's attack, Keyblade swinging forward, light building around its shaft, a familiar shield intercepted the approaching projectile. A familiar shield bolstered by magic. And with an ear-deafening *clang* of metal screeching against metal, even as the thrown buckler cracked under the strain, the purplish-pink sword-staff ricocheted at an uncontrollable angle into the stands.

"Huh? What?"

Sora stumbled over his own relief, "Goofy? Donald?"

"What are you waiting for?"

Furiously pointing his staff towards the incapacitated villain as he and Goofy emerged from the tunnel, Donald's left eyebrow twitched, ["Finish him, already!"](#)

"Au contraire!"

His physical body might have been restrained by the demigod's superior prowess, an advantage growing stronger by the moment,

but Exdeath snarled. And responding to his growing annoyance, a purplish-pink blur violently spun towards the unworthy Keyblade wielder, **"I shan't lose to a mere puppet!"**

"Wah!"

The improvised projectile's weight tripled... then increased sevenfold... courtesy of Donald pouring every last scrap of magic into one final technique.

"Impossible!"

Exdeath audibly stumbled when the purplish-pink blade slammed into the ground, **"An insignificant pest shouldn't possess such power!"**

"It's over, Exdeath!"

He still didn't know *how* the Keyblade worked. There were still a lot of things he needed to learn. Questions he'd ask Ryuko as soon as they found her. But even so, sprinting towards Exdeath, Sora suppressed his fear. He was scared. He was afraid. And he was a little terrified. But Donald and Goofy were counting him. Everybody was depending on him! If he didn't stop this guy, countless people would get hurt or worse!

"NOW..."

With one final defiant scream, Sora thrust his arms forward, stabbing the Keyblade through the hole in Exdeath's armor.

"... TAKE THIS!!!"

Chapter 12.8

Comprehension: *Darkness? Light? The yin-yang dynamics of reality bore me! Who needs power when you have swords! Lots and lots of swords! Unlimited blades! Eh-haha!!!*

~Gilgamesh~

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/f/fd/Sc00012.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140315010541>]

"Huh?"

Her knuckles stopped inches from the goon's bloodied face.

"Oh, great. Not again..."

Grasping thick folds of the man's tunic in her other hand, Ryuko found herself, not for the first time, gazing somewhere in the distance. A place, or maybe a world, different from this one. And it really ticked her off. Because every now and then, for no reason whatsoever, batcrap feelings pop into her heart out of the goddamn blue. Emotions unconnected to what she'd be doing. Like suddenly feeling happy when she was really bored. Or a burst of annoyance while hanging out with Mako and Satsuki. The feelings were never shallow. Whenever they slammed into her heart, it was like getting hit by a freaking boulder to the face.

Which was why she'd gone straight to Yen Sid.

If anyone could help figure out the deal with her heart, it'd be him. Or Beatrix. Or maybe Ansem, if the bastard hadn't gone off the deep end several years earlier, unleashing massive waves of Heartless on the Realm of Light. But Yen Sid didn't know what was wrong. In fact, there was *nothing* wrong with her heart. It was perfectly fine. It wasn't damaged or strained or influenced by darkness.

So, after really thinking about the problem and talking with Satsuki and Mako and even Gamagori, she decided to simply ignore the emotions.

And it usually worked.

Until now.

Because for once, she willingly accepted the unwanted emotions as she bulldozed her way through murderers, thieves and various other types of assholes.

"W-What are you idiots doing?! KILL THEM!!!"

The battered thief, the last of more than twenty bandits who thought tag teaming her was a good idea, fell to the ground with an unceremonious *thud*, moans passing through his bleeding lips. And stepping over his still-living corpse, Ryuko's eyes swiveled rightward. Ugh! That voice was like nail on chalkboards. It felt like someone poured oil down the back of her shirt. It was obnoxious. And disgusting. It made her want to throw away ten years of maturity to punch whoever was screaming at the top of their lungs right in the balls.

"HEY!!!"

She snapped her arm forward, fingers clenched into a fist as Threadcutter materialized alongside a whispering explosion of twinkling crimson stars.

"WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING!?"

Flipping the Keyblade around her fingers into a reverse grip, Ryuko planted one sneaker deep enough into the ground that she kicked up sand, sending some of the stuff falling straight into her sock. She took another step forward, cocking her arm backwards, crimson light dancing around and between Threadcutter. Pivoting at the waist, her other arm swept through the moon-lit darkness, clawing streaks of

radiant light in its wake. Feathery bangs of dual-colored hair, evidence of her unique and strange origins, shimmered with the same intensity as her heart.

A powerful light originating from the possibilities born of her hopes, dreams and imagination.

"HUAAAAHHH!!!"

And with a primal scream, she *threw* Threadcutter straight towards the bandit fleeing across the cavern.

CRUNCH-BOOM!!!

Abis Mal screamed like a little girl when the crimson and gold weapon passed overhead. A roaring banshee promising endless misery. And as existence itself exploded, he instinctively ducked, hands clutching his favorite turban. His *only* turban. But when nothing happened apart from some rocks falling onto his shoulders, not even a timed delay of magic, he picked his head up, looked back and forth, then at the blade stabbed nearly a foot into solid rock before chuckling. A nervous sound carrying across the cavern.

But it was nothing more than a temporary stay of execution as a blinding flash of red light gave him a headache.

And white-knuckled fingers latched around his collar.

"P-P-Please don't kill me!"

The left side of Ryuko's face convulsed at his pathetic blubbering.

"Shut up!"

It didn't work. Not that she expected telling the whimpering bandit to shut up would work. But holding onto Abis Mal with an iron-like grip capable of crushing metal, Ryuko reached out, curled her fingers around Threadcutter and effortlessly yanked the Keyblade straight out of the wall. Which caused the now-crying bandit to start spewing

bullshit promises and declarations about turning over a new leaf. And going straight. Oh, and her personal favorite, turning himself into the authorities. And that really pissed her off. A lot. More than if he had simply shut his mouth.

"I said SHUT UP!!!"

Finally. It finally worked. And having the bastard finally shut his goddamn mouth brought peace and quiet. It made her envious of Satsuki. Not her sister's lack of humor. Or that stick up her ass. Or Satsuki's pathetic inability to hold down more than a single drink. Which was hilarious no matter how many times Gamagori said otherwise.

No, what she desired was Satsuki's ability to make weak-willed, pathetic morons cram their mouths through sheer intimidation.

Because if the asshole didn't stop crying, or began leaking snot onto her jacket, she'd shove Threadcutter so far up his ass he'd be coughing out Keyblades!

"And blow those goddamn excuses out your freaking ass!"

One of her eyes twitched. Not from annoyance. And not from the pudgy bastard loudly sniffing. Was she laying it on a little too thick? Maybe. A little. Hell, more than a little. It was embarrassing for a twenty-eight-year-old woman to behave like a punk fresh off the street. She'd long-since grown out of that ridiculous phase. She matured and learned how to talk without cursing every other goddamn word. Partially because of Satsuki and Mako. But mostly because of Beatrix beating manners into her skull.

But these assholes weren't standard hired goons.

They were worse.

She could literally *smell* the darkness gripping their hearts.

No wonder so many goddamn Heartless were lingering outside this place.

"Now start talking!"

Swallowing her disgust through sheer force of will, Ryuko hefted Abis Mall off the ground, "Where's the stupid sword!?"

"S-Sword?"

Abis Mal stammered bits and pieces of random words.

"I... buh... how... w-what sword?"

The vein on her forehead bulged while the corner of her mouth twitched. *Now* she wasn't acting. Now she was truly pissed. And he must have realized it. Because when she slammed him against the wall, causing more than a few small rocks to fall from the cavern's roof, the crimson light within her hair flickered ominously across his trembling face.

"Don't play stupid!"

Threadcutter was a gold and ruby blur as it spun around her fingers. A lethal distortion of dancing color and metal while her eyes, narrowing by the second, stared through the crying bandit's heart. Maybe she ought to dial it back. Just a little. Because she really wasn't acting like a Keyblade Master. If Beatrix were here, she'd probably be disappointed. Or reluctantly impressed. Or want to teach this bandit a couple of valuable lessons. But Steiner? The guy would bark and rant about 'besmirching and dishonoring countless generations of masters with her childish, inconsiderate behavior.' All while demolishing everything and everyone in his path.

Well screw that!

If anyone got all hot and bothered, they could complain to her fist!

"Either you tell me where it is..."

Stabbing her Keyblade into the ground deep enough to stand on its own, Ryuko cocked her arm backwards, knuckles bleeding white from the building pressure, "... or I start rearranging your face!"

And just like that, Abis Mal's bladder nearly emptied itself.

"I... uh... I... I-I-I-lost it?"

"LOST IT!?"

Gilgamesh's disbelief echoed far and wide throughout the cavern. Followed by the swordsman launching himself hundreds of feet in her direction. Or maybe he traveled through the darkness between worlds. Ryuko didn't know. And she really didn't care. Not when she wanted to grab the bastard's throat, smash his face into the sand and make him cry goddamn uncle. Because one moment she was pressing the sniveling bandit against the wall, a literal *inch* away from using Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade as bludgeoning instrument. And the next, as the guy's screeching voice finally stopped clawing at her eardrums, Gilgamesh rudely shoved her aside.

"WHAT DOES THAT MEAN!?"

Hoping to jostle the information from the cowardly thief's mind, Gilgamesh replaced Ryuko's deceptively strong grip with a pair of his own hands, "TALK YOU SPOONY THIEF!!!"

"I-I-I..."

Abis Mal flinched when the rune-covered sword in Gilgamesh's lower left hand, a sun and moon carved onto either side of its golden hilt, pressed against his stomach. The sword had to be valuable. Really valuable. More valuable than anything he'd ever stolen. He couldn't help himself. Even moments away from getting carved like a turkey, he *wanted* the valuable weapon. But the pressure was too much.

"A-Alright! I'll talk! I'll talk!"

The swordsman's intense glare was bad enough on its own. But the woman? He didn't know who - or what - she was, but the broad tore through his men like wet paper. Her inhuman strength defied imagination. How could anyone be this powerful? Or *punch* their way through magic? There were sorcerers and wizards. But none of them could simply ignore magic like it was nothing. And so, the bandit chief surrendered without so much as a fight, a literal river of sweat and tears dribbling down his face.

"I... well... um... I was in town, hoping to hire some extra security, when *he*..."

He nervously nodded towards Gilgamesh, all while never looking away from Ryuko.

"... fell... um... out of the sky? Or, um, off a building. That's when I saw it. Every thief worth their dagger knows about the legendary sword. The sultan's crown jewel. The blade capable of summoning water from the desert. It was just lying there. On the ground. So... I... um... well, I took it. But before I could skip town, this monkey -"

"Shut up for a moment!"

Ryuko's mouth twisted into a disgusted grimace. And not from the horrendous odor wafting off the unbathed bandit. Perhaps by instinct, or more likely genuine irritation, her fingers reached for Threadcutter. With a grunt, they grasped the Keyblade's handle, the delicate-looking keychain brushing against her wrist. And her narrowing eyes swiveled from Abis Mal to the swordsman doing his personal interpretation of a goddamn statue, "You know... I could've sworn you said this bastard **STOLE** that freaking sword!"

"We can chitchat about the minor details later!"

Her grip on Threadcutter hardened.

"The hell do you mean 'minor'?"

Brushing aside the unnerving sensation of Ryuko boring a hole through the back of his neck, Gilgamesh bolstered his resolve by hefting the bandit another foot off the ground, "What was this about a monkey?"

"I-I don't know!"

Abis Mal tried shrugging. But all he could accomplish, the only thing his body could do without collapsing into a pile of useless jelly, was a nervous gulp, "By the time I picked my face out of the mud, the flea-bitten animal was running down the street. That's all I know! I swear! Kill Haroud if you want! Just don't kill me! Please!"

Ryuko *really* hated the pudgy asshole of a bastard.

"Cram it!"

It was unbelievable. No. Scratch that. It was totally believable. Because the longer the bandit blabbered, cried, pled for his life and offered to throw his men to the wolves to save his own skin, the more she wanted to punch his smarmy face. But she was a Keyblade Master. Not some short-tempered, hotheaded punk charging her way through Honnouji Academy after her dad's killer, "We ain't gonna kill you. *He* might be acting like you stood him up..."

She jabbed a thumb towards Gilgamesh, ensuring her vitriol and sarcasm came across loud and clear, "But despite your goddamn face pissing me the hell off, you told the truth. And that's what counts."

A feeling resembling hope blossomed within Abis Mal's shriveled heart, "R-Really?"

"What?"

Gilgamesh balked at the previously undisclosed promise, his painted features furrowing, "I agreed to no such arrangement!"

"Put that thing away."

Nobody saw the master move. Not Abis Mal, who was one surprise away from emptying his bladder. Nor Gilgamesh, who'd been staring straight into Ryuko's eyes from the moment she decided their next course of action without consulting him. Yet Ryuko suddenly appeared out of the corner of the latter's eye... on the other side of his body... Keyblade preventing him from unsheathing Lightbringer, which he'd been stealthily attempting since she changed their terms of agreement.

"We're NOT killing him."

Threadcutter quivered. Not because she was having trouble holding Lightbringer back. In the contrary, Gilgamesh seemed really, *really* intent on overpowering the Keyblade through sheer physical strength, "If it makes you feel any better, you could be the one to drag him back to Agrabah."

"W-What?"

A grin, wide and mischievous, one incisor poking against her lower lip, answered the bandit's stammering question, "Hope you like cramped cells and shackles! Because that's gonna be the rest of your miserable life!"

"Don't / have a say in this?"

Her eyes swiveled towards the swordsman fast enough that he immediately backed off.

"Oh, alright. Fine."

The unexpected betrayal tasted worse than expired milk. Or Gysahl Pickles, which ranked among the most disgusting foods in existence. Visibly deflating while more than a discontent mutter passed through his grumbling lips, Gilgamesh reluctantly, and with great hesitation, removed Tournesol from the whimpering bandit's throat. There was

no way he'd willingly return to Agrabah. Not until the heat died down. It made no sense. For reasons eluding his great mind, everyone and their parents considered him a criminal. A menace to society to be arrest and prosecuted.

All because he liberated Anastasia from atop her pedestal, where she'd been gathering dust for countless centuries.

Some people simply had no respect for weapons!

They were to be wielded! Used! Swung with intent to scatter one's adversaries! Not as ornamental trophies locked in some dark vault until entropy reduced existence to dust on the cosmic wind! Agrabah should have been grateful he, the great Gilgamesh, decided to procure such an amazing and legendary weapon for his collection!

"It's not like this was important to me or anything."

But there *was* good news. Not a lot of news, mind you, but enough to start gathering information. Whoever owned this monkey probably lived in Agrabah. It would be impossible for such a creature to survive in the desert. That narrowed the field of search, turning an impossible task into a downright difficult one.

"Say -"

"No."

Before the thieving swordsman could so much as *breathe* his suggestion, Ryuko stamped her foot against the ground. Literally and figuratively, "Don't even *think* about it."

"Balderdash!"

Gilgamesh was baffled, bewildered and confused by Ryuko's visceral animosity, "You don't even know what I was going to say!"

"It ain't happening!"

"But we've already come this far, Ryuko!"

It took longer than she expected. But her patience had finally reached its breaking point. It snapped, taking with it her ability to give a damn. She might be a Keyblade Master. Maybe one of the strongest, most badass people in the realm of light. But she was *done*. Getting dragged around a scorching hot desert in the middle of the freaking summer, all for a stupid sword, was worse than feeling someone's hand wriggling inside her chest. Every twitch and thrust as those gloved fingers grasped her heart and yanked the beating organ out of her chest horrendously painful.

She preferred *that* to this ridiculous charade!

"If you're done bitching, I held up my end of the deal!"

An eyebrow twitched. Once. Twice. And then a third time. It should have been impossible. But Gilgamesh's infatuation with weapons made her physically nauseous. Literally. And to stop herself from doing anything stupid, she closed her eyes, pinched the bridge of her nose and snarled, "Just... ugh! Damn it, just tell me everything you know about - huh?"

"Inconceivable!"

Gilgamesh mentally slapped himself.

"When did he -"

His confusion was contagious. Unbelievable! This was impossible! Gilgamesh found himself struck speechless. And then, because he was so surprised, he repeated the question. How was this possible? At some point between Ryuko to listen to his friendly request and turning aside to counter her ridiculous assertions, the spoony thief somehow wriggled out of his tunic. Curses! How could the man have escaped so easily? That was the important question. But a *better* question was why he hadn't noticed two hundred pounds of fat falling

to the ground. Or said girth escaping his grasp? Darkness and magic must be involved.

Nothing else explained such an embarrassing dereliction of duty.

At the very least, they should have heard an exhausted gasp of triumphant victory when the bandit fled into the shadows.

"Humph! That's it! I'm fed up with this forsaken desert."

Turning on a dime, the self-proclaimed greatest swordsman threw in the towel. He was *done*. A sentiment almost rarely expressed. And for good reason. As much as he really wanted the legendary scimitar, Anastasia was proving herself too much of a hassle for his tastes. There had to be dozens of monkeys in Agrabah. Maybe hundreds. It could take weeks before he finally tracked down this second thief with the monkey. Weeks spent hiding in buildings, getting sunburned, stealing food from vendors and begging the Moogles for discounts on their wares.

"The Heartless are bad enough, but I have better things to do with my time."

Gilgamesh propped one pair of hands on his waist before walking in the opposite direction, "Good luck with saving the worlds from darkness, Ryuko! When you find Maleficent, give her my regards."

"Like hell!"

A sneaker slammed into the back of the swordsman's knee. Not strong enough to break anything. But hard enough to send him sprawling forward, widening eyes and gasping mouth hitting the sandy floor with an embarrassing *thump*.

"We're not finished!"

Threadcutter devolved into a crimson and golden blur as it spun around Ryuko's fingers before she expertly caught the Keyblade.

After the bullshit nonsense on Arendelle, she wasn't about to let Gilgamesh escape into the darkness. Her annoyance was pungent. It permeated the cavern, carrying frustration and irritation along for the ride. Her eyes narrowed. Her lips pulled into a fang-filled snarl, exposing what couldn't be expressed with simple words.

"You're not leaving!"

And only when the bastard picked his head out of the sand, grumbling some bullshit under his breath, did she subtly adjust her aim southward, "Not until you start talking!"

"Hmm... I guess you *did* help."

Spitting out a mouthful of sand, which tasted worse than should be possible, Gilgamesh leapt off the ground, planted both feet shoulder-distance apart and proceeded to dust off his armor. Thick, sweeping brushes easily removing clumps of sand. A promise was a promise. It would be suicidal pushing his luck. Particularly after that nonsense in Arendelle with the snowman, ice monster and avalanche, "You wished to know about the mouse, right?"

"Yeah..."

Ryuko tightened her grip around Threadcutter. She didn't trust Gilgamesh. Not when the guy wanted something. Like a weapon. Especially a goddamn sword he'd spent days planning to steal, "Mickey came to you, didn't he?"

"Well... yeah? Didn't you already figure that out?"

He was being completely forthcoming with his information. No lies or half-truths. And yet, as he scratched his cheek, finally dealing with the itch that's been bothering him for over a minute, Ryuko's unexpected frustration was downright confusing, "He was very polite, you know. Explained everything. Can you believe it? The mouse wanted *my* assistance getting into the Realm of Darkness. He claimed it was for some important purpose. Bah! Who cares about

altruism? The darkness is far too dangerous even for a Keyblade wielder! One could lose their memories if they're not careful!"

"You say that..."

An eyebrow twitched, "... but I'm gettin' the strangest feeling you helped Mickey."

The silence was almost deafening.

"Alright. Spill it. What the hell did he promise you?"

"Don't you Keyblade Masters keep in touch?"

Gilgamesh rubbed the back of his neck, aware of, but not bothered by, Ryuko's mental faceplant, "Since you really don't know anything, he offered Caliburn. Which I've been searching for since that obnoxious knight got his greedy little hands on my collection."

"Ugh..."

A long and tired groan forced its way between Ryuko's lips, "God... damn it!"

Of all the... *of course* Mickey promised Gilgamesh something that ridiculous. The guy was simply too nice for his own good. But that didn't mean he was stupid. Or naïve. If Gilgamesh wanted a sword that couldn't slice bread, more power to him. That wasn't her problem. She trusted Mickey. And if handing over Caliburn meant entering the Realm of Darkness, then she needed to have faith in the guy.

"Whatever."

Blowing a strand of hair away from her right eye, Ryuko felt her sneakers sinking into the sand as she stepped away from Gilgamesh. She wasn't angry anymore. At least, not angrier than normal. With or without Gilgamesh, she'd know Mickey would eventually find his way into the Realm of Darkness. It was only a

matter of effort. Because the guy was amazingly resourceful when it came to stuff like solving strange and annoying magical puzzles. But this? This was different. A lot different. Mickey wanted her help for a reason. And that meant she needed to throw fear and nervousness to the curb

The anger was gone from her voice. She was calm. Collected. Dismissing Threadcutter back to the depths of her

"Here's the plan."

Even *she* knew this was batcrap insane. And that was saying something.

If anything went wrong, anything at all, she'd kick the bucket. Or worse, lose her heart to the darkness. But despite the considerable difference between their heights, more than four feet give or take, Ryuko glared into Gilgamesh's eyes without a drop of fear in her heart. Like it or not, she was a Keyblade Master. Threadcutter was one of only a handful of Keyblades standing between the Heartless and the Realm of Light. But more important than her duties and responsibilities, she couldn't die because Mako and Satsuki were waiting for her.

And that meant there wasn't a goddamn chance in hell she'd *die*.

Even if that meant dragging herself out of the darkness.

"First things first. You're gonna give up lookin' for this stupid sword."

She snapped a single finger in front of the asshole's widening eyes, "And don't start with the whole 'oh, you cannot possibly understand my motivations!' I don't give a rat's ass about your moronic obsession! As a matter of fact, since we're talking about it, you're gonna turn around and forget about the sword completely! Which means NEVER coming back!"

A much larger hand shoved her entire arm aside, "Hang on. Didn't I just say I'm -"

"Who gave you permission to talk!?"

The annoyance clinging to her voice interrupted Gilgamesh's pathetic whining. Huffing under her breath, Ryuko blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. But only after rolling her tongue inside her mouth, then spitting on the ground, did she jab two fingers in the swordsman's painted face, "Second! I gotta talk to the sultan... or king... or whoever runs this place about your screw up. So, while I'm gone, YOU'RE gonna tell Merlin about this. And by *this*, I mean Mickey being in the Realm of Darkness."

"Sorry, but I refuse!"

Ryuko's eyebrow twitched, "What the hell do you mean 'you refuse?'"

"We can banter and argue until darkness consumes every trace of light in the universe, but the answer is no!"

Gilgamesh flipped two pairs of hands disparagingly in Ryuko's direction. A rude gesture from his world. One of the rudest. But considerably less obscene than the 'middle finger' Ryuko extended whenever something severely tested her patience. Yet after more than a decade, he still didn't know what extending one's middle finger meant. None of the of worlds he'd traveled were familiar with the strange gesture. He knew it suggested an obscene vulgarity. But for some peculiar reason, asking Ryuko's friends and sister evoked either amusement or embarrassment.

It was, quite frankly, rather bizarre.

"With Enkidu as my witness, I shan't approach the sorcerer's domain. I refuse to allow that insane wizard transform me into a bird! Not again!"

"Whatever. Fine. Guess I can't make ya do anything ya don't want to do."

The rather quick capitulation instead of the usual back-and-forth arguing, shouting and eventual threats of physical violence, sent off warning bells throughout his heart. He stuttered mid-thought, mouth hanging slightly open. Something was *wrong*. Only a fool would presume Ryuko, of all people, accepted his refusal. Because the ambient moonlight dialed itself down several notches. The cavern grew darker. A feeling of overwhelming *doom* whispered on the fading breeze. He shivered. An involuntary reaction. Yet one that didn't make him feel any safer.

"Err... great? I mean, I'm glad you see things my way!"

Another chill raced down his spine as he cautiously stepped away from Ryuko, whose face was shrouded in darkness, "So... uh... I'll be going now..."

"How many swords ya got? Seven? Eight? Ten? Heard a lot of people are lookin' for some sweet payback."

It felt like someone sucker punched him in the stomach.

"T-That's blackmail!"

When she finally picked her head up, Ryuko's grin was unnervingly wide as she grabbed Gilgamesh's cloak before he could so much as *think* about escaping, "You're gonna tell Merlin about Mickey. Or I'm gonna beat your ass senseless, drag you back to Alexandria and let Beatrix have her way with you. Got it!?"

"But -"

"I said GOT IT!?"

"Grrr! Alright, fine!"

Gilgamesh immediately regretted his capitulation. Why was he surrendering? He could have easily escaped Ryuko's deceptively lithe and petite fingers. Maybe? He didn't quite know about the odds. She was awfully upset. And he had expended quite a bit of energy fighting those goons, thugs and assorted faceless henchmen. So, if he calculated the odds, beating Ryuko and escaping without broken bones, internal bleeding or a severe concussion were just over ten percent.

"Ugh, maybe the wizard has a short memory."

A quick brush removed various forms of dirt and sand from his cloak. One hand adjusted his kabuto, which had been pushed askew. And the sadistic glint in Ryuko's eyes earned one more grumble, "Aw crud. There's a third thing, isn't there?"

"Heh! I'm glad you asked."

An incisor poked against Ryuko's lower lip as she grinned, proudly and confidently, "Mickey needs my help. So, we're divin' straight into the Realm of Darkness. You. Me. And we ain't coming back until the Door to Darkness is locked good and tight."

[img:
https://66.media.tumblr.com/ece5e18e6382f48ad645fc332422b763/tumblr_olklg1r0il1vy2tggo8_400.jpg]

Chapter 13.1

Curiosity: *There's something interesting about ~his~ heart. I don't know what. But I'm more than willing to find out.*

~Nui Harime~

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/c/c8/1105.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140228052817>]

"Bum-bum-bum bum-bah-bum-bum..."

The innocuous humming emanated carefree innocence, heralding of childhood pastimes and summer dreams.

A perfect harmony.

Waves gently crashing upon tranquil shores.

"Bum-bum-bum bum-bah-bum-bum..."

A languid breeze whistled through the desolate landscape. Crag and scar-marked plateaus loomed over the decrepit canyon, casting twisted shadows and whispering dreadful secrets into those willing to open their heart. Long since extinguished pinpricks of light, once full of hope for a better future, one where peace and tranquility covered the world, free of any darkness and war, recoiled at her presence.

At the presence of something far beyond their meager understanding.

"Hmm... hmm... hmm-hmm-hmm..."

Dirt crunched underneath her heeled boots as she strolled past innumerable tombstones. Her melodious tittering, carried upon the groaning wind, whistled between slightly grinning lips. Bangs of

shoulder-length blonde hair bounced out of frame, hidden within the bright pink hood draping shadows over the upper half of her face. Deceptive innocence concealed inhuman malevolence. An eldritch sadism impossible to satiate through worldly possessions. Within the form-fitting and customized double-breasted trench coat adorning her petite yet womanly figure, excitement flushed through her pulsing heart.

And as she reached the crossroads, clouds of dust swirling around her ankles, Nui Harime's smile steadily widened.

"I didn't think they'd defeat my_puppet so ~gosh-darn~ easily."

Craning her head backwards, bright sapphire eyes carrying more than their fair share of wistful mirth, the former Grand Couturier grinned at the thousands upon thousands of fallen blades littering the bleak graveyard. Rusted and abandoned fragments of deceased Keyblade wielders lay thrust into the dirt, polished metal worn and rusted by the relentless passage of time. The remnants of the battle which sundered reality into far too many pieces to count stood as ageless tombstones. Silent testaments of humanity's sins to those stepping foot upon this world.

And yet Nui found herself smiling.

"It's honestly embarrassing!"

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 13 - Face My Fears

Several seconds passed as her words died upon the wind.

But standing amongst millennia-old Keyblades, alone with nothing but her thoughts and heart for company, coat lightly fluttering in the wind, Nui Harime clasped both hands behind her back.

"Oh well!"

It wasn't unbecoming of someone such as herself to admit defeat. Nobody was perfect. Nobody was unstoppable or unbeatable. Even her *maman*, the strongest and most powerful being on their world, had fallen upon the cusp of victory. Which was pathetic. An opinion developed after ten years of traveling the worlds. The Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet should've been perfect. Upon allowing herself to be adorned and worn by Shinra Koketsu, Ragyo activated the countless Life Fibers strewn across the planet. Just as planned. Thanks to Shinra Koketsu's overwhelming power and Absolute Domination, Ryuko and her stupid friends should have lost. The Scissor Blades shouldn't have been able to cut the ultimate dress.

And yet, minutes after humanity was absorbed into the blanket of Life Fibers swallowing their old world, Ryuko accomplished the impossible.

But she didn't blame her sister.

Because that's how the world worked.

The strong survived while those too weak to fulfill their ambitions were crushed underfoot.

And in the case involving the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet, Ryuko simply proved herself superior to Ragyo Kiryuin.

"You win some, you lose some."

She still didn't have any answers. And that was super annoying. Super-duper annoying. Where did Sora find that Keyblade? How could an average pig in human clothing be worthy of holding something so special? No matter how many ways she looked at it, there was absolutely nothing special about the kid. Nothing at all. Nothing whatsoever. Because she knew Ryuko better than anyone. Even better than Satsuki and that boorish woman. Her sister would *never*, even if it meant saving someone's pathetic life, allow anyone touch Threadcutter.

Which complicated things.

"Well, to be fair..."

And that *really* bothered her.

"... I didn't exactly *lose*."

The menace accompanying her admission possessed an underlying malevolence. Was it really losing if she got something anyway? Sora might have beaten her puppet, but that didn't change anything. Not one thing. If he could barely defeat her puppet with help from a demigod, a pacifistic knight and a half-baked mage, Sora didn't stand a chance against her. And especially against Ryuko. Of course, that all depended on whether the kid was stupid enough to actually raise his Keyblade at her. He seemed smarter than Ryuko. But tittering at the thought of Sora, an ordinary human with no special traits, outwitting Ryuko, Nui reached up and lowered her hood, flushed cheeks darkening in the twilight.

"La vie est drôle."

Seconds.

It would have taken *seconds* to reassemble her puppet after Sora struck the so-called finishing blow.

Because puppets couldn't feel pain. They couldn't experience fear, terror or hesitation. They weren't pigs in human clothing. Or the other pathetic animals scattered across the many worlds. And her marionette had been no exception. Everything it said... every angered outburst and bombastic declaration carrying genuine cruelty and superiority... had been nothing more than ventriloquism. Or, to be more precise, her voice resonating through the Life Fibers sewn throughout its armor, joints, weapon and every conceivable place one could reach.

But she knew better than to overstay her welcome.

"Sora sure was interesting..."

For some inexplicable reason, something about the kid tickled her heart. It was strange. Weird. And almost immediately, she corrected herself, more than a little embarrassed by the slip of her tongue.

"... for a human, at least."

Puffing her cheeks, Nui pivoted clockwise, both arms folded underneath bosom. It sure was irksome. No matter how much she otherwise desired, she couldn't deny Sora was at least somewhat interesting. Not strong. Or smart. Or powerful. Simply plain old interesting. Nobody, not even Ryuko or Satsuki or anyone, could pick up a Keyblade and start swinging the thing. Keyblades didn't work like that. Yet somehow, against impossible odds, that's the only explanation about Sora possessing the Keyblade which made sense.

How utterly boring.

That wasn't interesting at all!

Gazing at the sun perpetually hovering over the western horizon, hazy mirages of autumnal colors swirling between the boundary between earth and sky, Nui raised her arms, hands forming into a stylized heart around the celestial body, "It would have been nice to see what Sora could *really* do with that boring Keyblade."

The silence pressed against her heart, broken only by the incessant wind.

"There's always next time."

Her lips steadily curled into a malevolent smile, "As Ryuko says, you keep trying and trying until you win. And then you try some -"

She felt it.

Felt *him*.

"Huh?"

Nui's body moved before her heart caught up with the situation. For the first time in forever, she found herself speechless. Her! The Grand Couturier! Friendly and extroverted as can be! Always willing to talk and have lots of fun. Speechless! Glancing over her shoulder, a single bright blue eye, spoke-like rings surrounding its pupil dilating in the sunlight, widened at the figure emerging over the horizon like a mirage. And as they grew clearer until, without a doubt, she knew who it was, strange and unwanted emotions stabbed painfully against her heart.

"Gosh! You're alive?"

Upon discarded the unwanted emotions, she pivoted on the spot, facing the mysterious figure standing amidst the fallen Keyblades with a wide and friendly smile. But as she observed and saw *what* stood betwixt the gravestones, Nui puffed her cheeks.

"Well, not really *alive*."

Their silhouette was hazy. A mirage fluttering against the sunset. But she recognized the armor. Maybe not *personally*. But the heart never forgets. And right now, even if Ryuko was helping that swordsman slash criminal, those memories synchronized with her heart. They fought against her smile. They twisted curiosity and excitement into intensifying anger and hatred. And yet, no matter how hard Ryuko's emotions and feelings tried, they weren't her own. They didn't hold any sway. Not even a little.

"Gee, this is a bummer."

Modestly perturbed when the man didn't speak, Nui clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, "... guess this means the old coot's still alive, doesn't it?"

"**Ry... uko?**"

It was strange, to say the least. She'd heard quite a bit of interesting beings over the last decade. Encountered her fair share of monsters. But the armored figure's voice reverberated with a metallic grinding echo that made one's ears bleed. The strained word, spoken after years of absolute silence, simultaneously came from everywhere and nowhere. It was quite hard to explain yet perfectly plausible. A conundrum of the highest order! She didn't *hear* the words so much as her heart sensed the figure's true meaning.

"... Ryuko?"

Her mischievous smile widened when the armored figure repeated Ryuko's name. She could *feel* it. Hope clung to whatever remnant of *his* existence stood before her. Nothing more than scattered fragments and lingering thoughts. It was pathetic. It would be polite and kind to put him out of his misery. But this was Ryuko's friend. One of a handful of people who helped her sister after that annoying creep and the Heartless destroyed their world.

Killing him... or whatever remained of him... would be exceptionally rude!

"No. You're not Ryuko."

An earthen light surrounded the figure's outstretched fingers. Summoned by his awakened rage, Earthshaker manifested into the physical plane. The extravagant dark brown Keyblade settled loudly upon materialization. Metallic creaking and groaning accompanied his arm swinging forward, pointing the Keyblade, keychain missing from its handle, towards her.

"Who are you?"

Oh, so it was going to be like that, huh? Well, two could play at that game.

"Just a woman of no consequence."

A soft breeze whistled through the discarded Keyblades, whispering tales of death, betrayal, suffering and agonizing torture. As it brushed against her body, shoulder-length bangs of curled blonde bouncing against her back, Nui's grin widened. Messing with humans was so gosh-darn easy. You just needed to pluck on their emotions and their hearts unraveled like a cheap sweater. Why her sister chose to associate herself with pigs in human clothing would never make sense. But beggars couldn't be choosers.

If Ryuko wanted to debase herself time and time again, all for the sake of inferior creatures, who was she to judge?

"What about you?"

Both hands were firmly clasped together against the small of her back as she leaned forward, a Cheshire-like smile adorning her deceptively innocent façade. The naughty and boring guy might have feigned ignorance. But she *wasn't* stupid. She knew - oh, she knew - the old-fashioned yet powerful armor standing betwixt fallen Keyblades was paying exceptionally close attention. It was blatantly obvious. Not to mention super interesting.

And so, without further ado, Nui Harime gave the enraged suit of armor one... last... *shove*.

"Still blaming yourself for that old coot killing everyone you loved?"

[Something must have struck a raw nerve.](#)

"Hup!"

Because the ground shattered underfoot when the enormous Keyblade smashed where she'd been standing.

"Hup! Hup! Hup!"

It wasn't so much that she was fast. Merely faster than him.

"Golly, you sure are angry!"

As she leapt from discarded Keyblade to Keyblade, never remaining upon a particular perch for more than a moment, amusement danced upon the tip of her tongue. Her coat ruffled in the shifting breeze. Clouds of dust kicked into the air by the concussive explosions accompanying the man's haphazard yet incredibly fast attacks. She laughed. And he snarled. And then she *stopped* laughing when dozens of light-based projectiles, molded and shaped into arrows, erupted from his Keyblade, brass-colored metal shifted into something resembling a crossbow.

Yet without her expression tightening in the slightest, Nui stepped sideways, strafing along the ground with arrows exploding inches behind her boots.

"Was it something I said?"

"Earthquake!"

The intense trembling was slightly interesting. Did he always have this ability? She couldn't remember. But honestly, after ten years, even Ryuko picked up more than a couple of new tricks. Glancing downwards, she watched the ground splinter and crack, rivets forming between her pink boots, earthen light blasting forth with dangerous strength. Gosh, this strange man really wanted her dead, didn't he? Still, she had plans. Lots of fun plans. And so, waiting until the last moment, she teleported several meters to the right, avoiding the powerful technique by the skin of her teeth.

And promptly found something snapping towards her neck.

"Come on!"

It was so obvious she almost didn't bother catching the Keyblade shooting through the air like a whip.

"Are you even ~trying~ to hit me?"

With another laugh bubbling from the depths of her heart, Nui reached out and grabbed the tendril of flowing metal before it could retract. Her fingers latched around the transformed Keyblade, resulting in a momentary standstill. The figure standing betwixt the fallen tombstones grasped the handle of their Keyblade with both hands, boots digging into the dirt for purchase while metallic grunts grated against her eardrums. She, on the other hand, leaned backwards, using her own momentum against the funny man.

He was good. Really good. But not good enough.

Especially not against someone like *her*.

"My turn!"

Fully intent on dragging the lingering bore off his feet and into the air, she pulled upon the whip-like Keyblade, deceptively lithe muscles tightening beneath her pink coat's sleeve.

"I don't think so."

Only for the guy to yank *harder* than expected.

Squelch!

Blood sprayed across the twilight-laded dirt.

"Huh?"

Nui was reasonably embarrassed. And a little uncomfortable. Plus, just a tad annoyed at herself. But during the split-second between her right arm flopping to the ground, twitching like a fish out of water, and the opposing Keyblade snapping back into proper shape, she mentally pouted. Humph, how irritating! Unlike the pigs in human clothing, losing an arm or leg wasn't anything more than a momentary setback. It didn't even hurt! Not one bit! Not like Ryuko, who believed she was a naked ape so much that her Life Fibers actually responded accordingly. Which was gosh-darn pathetic.

But that didn't mean *she* couldn't have some fun.

"MY ARM! OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD!
OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD! MY ARM!!!"

And just like that, she screamed her throat raw, repeating herself over and over again, purpose, perhaps even deliberately, overacting the part.

"MY AAARRRRMMM!!!!"

"Got you."

As they stood betwixt the graveyard of discarded Keyblades, the physical collection of fragmented memories snorted, **"It's over."**

"THIS ISN'T HAPPENING! NOT TO ME!"

Nui hyperventilated with every refusal, shivering and trembling when the armored figure began sauntered towards her, "I REFUSE TO LOSE TO SOMEONE LIKE YOU!"

"Where's Ryuko?"

An obnoxious *crunch* snapped Nui's eyes towards the ground, where her 'severed arm' was crushed beneath the lingering fragment's foot, **"Talk... before I remove your other arm."**

Gosh, was he actually giving *her* an ultimatum? She didn't hear any promises of healing her shoulder. Or staunching the bleeding. Which meant, more likely than not, he was going to kill her once she answered his questions. *If* she answered his questions. For the briefest of possible moments, Nui contemplated continuing her little charade. She stared at the blade aimed between her eyes. Her mouth twisted into an animalistic and inhuman snarl. An anger more intense than anything humanly possible bubbled within her heart.

And then she *smiled*.

"Boy, you sure are dumb!"

She had to give him credit for immediately jumping backwards. Humans tended to freeze, either from shock or terror, whenever she pulled this trick. But the guy in the familiar armor possessed enough common sense to place as much distance between them as physically possible. Not that she planned on counterattack. Or seeking vengeance. Even if he'd severed her shoulder without so much as a hello, she wasn't *that* vindictive.

Especially against someone who couldn't possible hurt her.

Not even with his Keyblade.

"If you chop my arm off, it'll just pop right back on again! See?"

Was it perhaps a little cliché? Maybe. She certainly didn't need to announce her body pulling itself back together. But on cue, her arm twitched as Life Fibers shimmered and twinkled in the twilight, connecting the viscera of her severed arm to the jagged flesh hanging off her shoulder. The crimson threads spun and wove through the air. They bunched into fibers thicker than her fingers. And leaning forward, eyes widening ever-so-slightly from both amusement and childish delight, the limb popped right back into position with a sound oh-so-similar to fabric pushing through a sewing machine.

"And ~that~ means fighting me is useless!"

Her head bobbed back and forth, lips quirking into a mocking smile as her pink coat self-repaired, courtesy of the special threads woven into the magical garment.

"Useless! Useless! Useless! Useless! Someone like ~you~ can't kill me! You might as well stop trying!"

"In that case..."

The figure defiantly raised their Keyblade instead of listening to her advice, **"I'll just have to try harder."**

["Oh bother."](#)

The massive Keyblade flashed across the setting sun when the lingering annoyance warped in the air directly in front of her. Holding the keychain-less weapon sideways, dark earthen light clinging to its sharp teeth, they crossed the graveyard in the blink of an eye.

"You sure ~are~ stubborn."

Entirely and unequivocally relaxed despite the looming weapon arcing towards her neck, intent on severing her head in one fell swoop, lavender light bearing traces of eldritch regality caressed her fingers. Four-pointed pink stars twinkled in the ambient light, reflecting and refracting the perpetual twilight enveloping the desolate world. The ominous display caught the lingering remnant's attention as *something* manifested from the innermost depths of her heart in a flash of purple light.

"Guess I have no choice."

CLANG!

The impact *should* have sent her sliding backwards along the ground.

The physical force *should* have shattered every bone in her arm, shoulder and possibly body.

But reality was full of things that simply never happened.

"Tada!"

As the ground underneath her boots violently cracked, rocks jutting upwards in ever-increasing circular explosions, Nui's smile imperceptibly widened. She hadn't wanted to use this just yet. Not so quickly. Not until she had some more fun. But beggars couldn't be

choosers. And from the way her arm trembled, muscles *burning* from effort unexpected necessary to keep herself from falling apart, both figuratively and literally, she really had no say in the matter.

"My very own Keyblade!"

The impact of the opposing weapon against her own Keyblade exploding across the wasteland. With an ear-splitting eruption of light and darkness, metal grinding against metal while burning sparks brushed her skin, reality reversed itself. The winds of fate changed course mid-stream. Not by her choice. Rather, something she said, or possibly did, must have irked her opponent. Maybe. She really didn't know. Or care all that much. But out of nowhere, like snapping his fingers, the industrial groans functioning as his voice transformed into what could only be called snarling hatred.

And suddenly Nui found herself crashing through Keyblades.

None of the impacts were particularly bothersome.

As a matter of fact, she didn't feel anything.

What she did experience, on the other hand, was the guy's Keyblade Glider smashing into her stomach. The sudden impact shattered her ribs. It pulverized her organs. Blood and spittle spewed from her lips. But even with crimson dribbling down her chin, Nui giggled. She chortled and laughed. She mocked the lingering remnant's attempted assassination right before swinging her Keyblade forward, intercepting the subsequent combo without missing so much as a beat.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

[img:

https://66.media.tumblr.com/c557930cee08d3b1b23ffad0513a234/tumblr_neerdxgxyk1tyak95o1_500.gif]

She honestly lost track of the number of times their Keyblades clashed.

Crossing one foot over the other, Nui danced and ducked and pivoted and pirouetted around the physically imposing Keyblade. It wasn't easy. Nope. Nope it wasn't. She was actually trying her very best not to let the darn thing slice and dice her to pieces. But no matter how fast she moved, the fragmented memories forced into the suit of tin armor was that much faster. Every time she deflected their Keyblade, it approached from a different angle. He was skilled. A lot more skilled than expected. But then again, he was the lingering fragments of Ryuko's friend.

A lesser being - in other words, most humans - would have long since faltered against the guy. Or died. Probably the latter.

Because he really was trying to kill her.

How *fun*!

"That Keyblade..."

Not for the first time this evening, and certainly not for the last, metal shifted against metal. Armor groaned beneath the weight of awakened emotions as bewilderment and confusion surrendered to hatred. Pressing downwards, overwhelming the former Grand Couturier's superhuman strength through intense willpower, the figure snarled when she suddenly and mockingly leapt out of range,

"How do you have Ryuko's Keyblade?"

"Aw! You noticed!"

Small clouds of brown dust accompanied Nui's retreat across the bleak wastelands. No matter how mocking it sounded, she really ~was~ flattered by the compliment! That someone like him would notice the similarities just about stole her breath! Ryuko and her were two sides of the same coin! Their hearts were connected! If

anything, it would have been strange if their Keyblades were entirely different!

"But if you ~really~ want to know..."

Her pulse was steady. Her posture perfect and prim. And as she abruptly *stopped* backpedaling in the middle of the crossroads, surrounded by fallen Keyblades and other screaming remnants of a long-forgotten war, the purple keychain attached to *her* Keyblade, a mockery of the eyepatch once blemishing her face, softly jingled in the shifting wind.

"... you'll have to make me talk."

Messing with humans was almost too easy. Unlike those naughty villains with their long-winded plans stretching over years, every step predicated on the 'good guys' doing everything by the books, she simply needed to read their hearts. It wasn't hard. Humans wore their emotions on their sleeves. All ~she~ needed to do was find out what motivated them. What pushed them forward. And once she did? Well, no matter how strong or powerful, if one knew what they were doing, hearts were exceptionally fragile.

Some pigs in human clothing believed she was a monster. A creature spawned from the Realm of Darkness. Ryuko and Satsuki called her psychotic, deranged and an insane sociopath lacking empathy and other useless emotions.

But they were ~all~ wrong.

She wasn't a monster or insane.

She was simply Nui Harime.

Nothing more.

"So, if I were you, I wouldn't bother holding back. Because if you *do*..."

No matter who stood in her way, or what interesting tricks and abilities they had up their sleeves, nobody could tell her what to do. She was a free spirit. An artiste. The former Grand Couturier of Revocs. She could go wherever she wanted. There was absolutely nobody who possessed the ability to stop her.

Well, *almost* nobody.

"Seamstress is going to simply ~tear~ your old and rusted armor to shreds!"

Chapter 13.2

Imagination: *There's no limit to what the heart and mind can accomplish. As long as you think it, believe it, magic can bring your dreams to life!*

~Merlin~

[img:

[https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/disney/images/3/3b/Tumblr_inline_n14o1jawvj1rsgw6y.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/796?cb=20150213044942\]](https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/disney/images/3/3b/Tumblr_inline_n14o1jawvj1rsgw6y.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/796?cb=20150213044942)

It took only a small push for the door to swing inwards. And then fall completely off its hinges. Rusted metal, flaked and fragile thanks to the relentless passage of time, shattered as weathered wood and iron bolts crashed to the floor with an obnoxious *thud*.

"Hello?"

Unperturbed by the loud impact, dust billowing around them, reaching nearly to the cobwebs on the ceiling, Goofy glanced back and forth. While breaking and entering was technically a crime, he didn't think walking into an empty and abandoned house would hurt anyone. Particularly one at the back of an underground cave filled with colorful fireflies.

"Merlin?"

Cupping both hands around his mouth, he repeated the question, only with somewhat more emphasis, "Anybody home?"

"Huh?"

Sora stepped around Goofy and promptly found himself about to sneeze, all thanks to the thick cloud of dust clinging to the house. Wow, what a letdown. After following the streets through the Third

District, which conveniently led to a door only his Keyblade and a bit of fire magic could open, across an underground lake filled with luminescent fish, he expected more. Because, if he was being perfectly honest, the place looked worse than some of the empty houses back on the islands. There were even boarded-up windows and cobwebs as far as the eye could see.

"Hey Donald, you sure this is the right place?"

A moment passed before, with a loud *splash* and accompanying restrained grumbling, said court wizard stormed out of the lake.

"Of course I'm sure!"

After squeezing himself through the small gap between Goofy and the doorframe, then pushing around Sora, who was standing in the middle of the room, Donald swept his gaze left to right. And his mood immediately soured enough to curdle milk. Because there was absolutely *nothing* inside the ramshackle building only cursory resembling a house. Not a table or a chair or even an old, moldy bed. Abandoned houses usually had dusty armoires covered with white sheets. Or full-length mirrors lurking somewhere in the dark. But all he could see was dust. Lots and lots of sneeze-inducing dust.

Which meant only one thing.

"Cid must've given us the wrong address!"

That was it. There was no other possible explanation. With one eyebrow twitching, the ill-tempered mage angrily brushed dust off his feathers. It was one thing after another. And it all started after Exdeath's corpse disappeared into glowing darkness. Which didn't make any sense, "C'mon! Let's head back and -"

"ACHOO!!!"

The sneeze, as surprising as it was expected, roiled the thick clouds of dust. Not only was it loud and obnoxious, echoing off the walls

and ceiling before heading out through the front door, it knocked Donald's hat clear off the mage's head.

"Gawrsh, I'm awfully sorry, Donald."

"Yeah. Yeah."

Goofy sniffed when he felt another sneeze coming, "Ya know I have allergies."

"Don't remind me."

As one of his best friends since he could remember picked up his hat, dust flying off the zippers and fabric, the knight captain stepped further into the most-likely haunted house. He couldn't imagine Merlin living in such a dump. Maybe he never personally met the guy, but Merlin trained Master Yen Sid and Master Lulu. And they were two of the strongest magic users in all the worlds, "Hey, do ya think we should ask Master Yen Sid? He probably knows where we can find Merlin."

"Hmm..."

A beat passed as Donald pondered the suggestion, "We still need to find Ryuko and the King, remember?"

It was like stepping into a dream.

He was awake. And yet, for some reason, everything felt muted. Muffled. He could still hear Donald and Goofy. They were still talking about Yen Sid and Merlin. But their voices were off. Not quite right. Growing louder and softer randomly and without warning. But for some reason, Sora wasn't worried. Or concerned. And as he walked into the room, small clouds of dust rising around his sneakers, a large book tucked underneath his right arm, something washed over his heart. He could almost smell wet sand. The salty breeze rustled his spiky hair. And if he tried really hard, he could taste the spray from the ocean as waves crashed onto the beach.

"There's something about this musty place..."

Her voice stopped him cold.

"It sorta reminds me of the secret place back home, where we used to scribble on the walls."

Humming softly as she stared out the window, an almost familiar sunset replacing the glowing darkness of the underground cave, the apparition clasped both hands behind her back.

"Do you remember when Ryuko said she'd take us to other worlds?"

Sora tried talking, but the words simply didn't come.

"I wish I could see Alexandria. To walk beside the waterfalls dropping into the misty ocean."

The warmth in Kairi's eyes when she turned around was brighter than the sun.

"Promise you'll take me there, okay?"

"Sora?"

He reached out, desperately trying to prove to himself Kairi was real and not merely a figment of his imagination.

"Ya see something?"

It felt similar to waking up from an intense dream.

In the blink of an eye, Kairi was gone, almost as if she'd never been there in the first place. The familiar smell and salty breeze had vanished, replaced by musty odors and oppressive silence. And his heart painfully clenched. Had Kairi really been in the room with them? It was impossible. He knew it was impossible. It had to be an illusion or trick of the light. There was no way Goofy and Donald wouldn't have seen her. And yet, despite his mind telling him to give

up and accept reality and the truth, Sora couldn't stop himself from believing Kairi had really been standing there.

"Oh, it's... nothing."

He could *feel* her in his heart.

"So, uh..."

For a few more seconds, longer than necessary and nowhere near long enough, he pondered what to say. And whether to say anything. But only when Kairi didn't return, leaving him alone with nothing but his own thoughts for company, did he turn around, facing Donald and Goofy with a noticeably false frown, "I guess Merlin's not here. Do you think he moved?"

"Maybe..."

That *did* sound reasonable. But after exchanging looks with Goofy, who shrugged at Sora's strange behavior, Donald rolled his eyes, "But before we do *anything*, we should meet up with Leon and -"

An obnoxious explosion of multicolored smoke smelling vaguely of exotic fruits, sunburn, overpriced trinkets and other miscellaneous memories burst through one of the stones right outside the front door.

"Humph!"

Accompanied by a noise Sora swore sounded like gears and springs slowly unwinding, then crashing and breaking, a strange man *stepped* through the space-time continuum. Emerging out of the nothingness between worlds in a way that didn't quite make sense, the heavily bearded and mustached old man with eyebrows nearly as thick as Satsuki's grumbled, sand and seashells falling from his overstuffed suitcase.

"What! A! Mess!"

Merlin bemoaned his situation in a tone slightly above mild annoyance but not quite irritation or frustration. Perturbed, maybe. But nowhere near actually writing a letter of complaint to the manager. And for some inexplicable reason that went straight over Donald's head, the infamous sorcerer, one of the strongest magic users throughout the worlds, was wearing a horrendously bright Hawaiian shirt, matching baseball cap and neon purple bathing shorts angry enough to give Sora second thoughts.

"Honestly!"

Wiggling his left foot, which was strangely devoid of a sneaker unlike the right, Merlin huffed, "Why on earth would that strange creature want my left shoe?"

"Hey, Merlin!"

Completely unsurprised by the sorcerer's introduction in sharp contrast to Donald and Sora, Goofy waved, "How was your vacation?"

"Fine for the most part. But everything was so *pricey*."

It took more than a handful of seconds for Merlin to realize he wasn't alone. And a little longer for his mind to catch up with his heart. The subtle raising of bushy eyebrows. Surprise tempered by disbelief and confusion. A deep-seated sensation of déjà vu in the pit of his stomach. This had happened before. Or something awfully close. It wasn't every day someone took him by surprise. A rare event indeed. Why, if Lulu were here, she'd probably find this quite funny. But with practiced aplomb and a heavy cough in the back of his throat, Merlin brushed aside the awkwardness.

"Oh ho-ho! You must be the King's friends!"

The overstuffed suitcase hit the ground with a loud thud, " You'll have to forgive me. I wasn't expecting you for another... hmm, let's see..."

Reaching into his pocket, Merlin withdrew an old-fashioned pocket watch. For several seconds he stared at the hands. He gazed at the twelve zodiac symbols. And almost immediately his eyebrows shot above the sunglasses steadily falling down the bridge of his nose. "... four days, six hours, two minutes and fifty-one seconds from now? That can't be right. Perhaps I stumbled into a temporal hyperloop. Maybe? Yes. Perhaps. That would explain the chronological inertia. Oh dear, that means I need to hurry if I'm going to get Guinevere's birthday present. Maybe a model airship kit? But kids these days like Gummi Ships. What to do..."

"Uh... Merlin?"

This was Merlin? The super-powerful and strong wizard Ryuko claimed to have teleported Tidus's dad halfway into the ocean. The guy capable of *everything*, even things you couldn't imagine. Sharing an awkward glance with Donald, who shrugged, almost as befuddled and confused as himself, Sora hemmed and hawed before finally asking, "You *are* Merlin, right?"

"Hold on one moment."

Extracting a wooden wand from the magical space between his nonexistent sleeves and wrist, something which gave the trio a headache out of sheer bewilderment, the all-powerful sorcerer tapped it against his head.

"ALAKAZAM!!!"

Another multicolored burst of smoke shifting between red and blue and green and orange and several other impossible clouds traveled downwards, sideways and multiple directions around Merlin. Not only hiding the sorcerer from view but filling every nook and cranny of the house with the faint smell of freshly-cut grass and bales of hay.

"Well, since you already know my name, I suppose we can skip the introductions."

With his suitcase metamorphosed into a purple carpet bag, spectacles in place of sunglasses and wearing an ankle-length sky-blue robe with matching conical hat and slippers, Merlin brushed lint, dust and magic from his beard, "I am, of course, Merlin. As you can see, I know a little bit about magic. Anyway, it's a pleasure to finally meet you, Sora."

"Wha...?"

It never crossed Sora's mind that Ryuko or Yuna or someone else might have told the guy about him, "How do you know my name?"

"Ho-ho, we wizards have a knack for knowing such things."

Oblivious, or perhaps not, to the dozens of other questions Sora wanted to ask, Merlin worked the crick out of his neck. A quick application of restoration magic relieved his arthritic bones as his bushy eyebrows knitted together, "Gentlemen, I'd stand back if I were you!"

First rolling up his left sleeve, then his right, before repeating the effort when both sleeves fell back down, he vigorously swished his wand sideways, upways and downways. Alternating colors and patterns streamed behind the dancing catalyst. Stars spun into existence. His nose briefly twitched. A sneeze threatened to disrupt everything. He raised both hands firmly overhead, beard momentarily wrapped around his wrists before falling free. Huffing loudly when his spectacles fell down the bridge of his nose, followed by his cap tilting at a leftward angle, he gathered the perfect amount of magic.

And as the carpet bag next to his slippers magically opened itself, he exclaimed four words in rapid succession.

"HIGITUS FIGITUS MIGITUS MUM!!!"

Sora couldn't *begin* to understand what happened. All he could do was look around and gasp. One moment the place was empty. And

the next, it looked like Merlin had been living here for years. Books lay piled in tall stacks reaching halfway to the ceiling, always on the verge of tipping over but never quite doing so. Purple flames crackled in the fireplaces green and blue while emitting purple smoke. Chemicals and other liquids bubbled and toiled. Strange odors and smells filled the house as overhead, magically dark despite the light filling every nook and cranny, the stars and constellations above Traverse Town stretched across the ceiling.

"Impressive, isn't it?"

He found the youth's childish fascination heartwarming. It had taken quite a bit of time perfecting the magic. Magic wasn't always simple. As a matter of fact, his first few tries resulted in the stars and constellations, which were highlighted for easy reference, spinning fast enough to give him a headache. But before he could explain the intricacies of such interesting and unusual magic to someone keen on listening to him, a whistle caught his attention.

"Ah, that must be the tea!"

Scurrying over to the old-fashioned stove, Merlin magicked the tea kettle off the red-hot coils before its contents spilled all over the floor, "You must be famished! Fighting Heartless can be quite the exhausting task! Can I get you anything? Milk? Cookies? Club sandwiches? Perhaps a cup of tea?"

Instead of waiting for the trio to speak with their stomachs instead of their hearts, which could have taken forever judging by their perplexed expressions, he glanced back and forth before rolling up his sleeves.

"Come! Come!"

Sometimes he forgot magic wasn't always intuitive, particularly the lesser-known schools outside the so-called 'black and white magic' used by far too many people for his liking these days. Nevertheless,

gathering both purpose and intent in mind, Merlin wrapped his wand against the mahogany table in the center of the room, something which immediately brought an end to the background noise and ambient sounds, "We have company, you know! No more dilly-dallying!"

One by one, as if dancing to silent music, plates and glasses carried themselves out of cupboards, cabinets and assorted shelves.

With another tap of his wand, milk, cookies and several varieties of sandwiches, ham and roast beef lazy as usual, hovered out of the suspiciously-spacious refrigerator no higher than his knees.

And only after, not one second before, everything settled into place, assorted foods and deserts gently falling onto plates, milk pouring itself into glasses before politely returning to the fridge and closing the door after itself, did Merlin pour himself a nice cup of steaming hot tea.

"Please help yourselves."

As the King's friends grabbed whatever they wished from the platters strewn across the table, Merlin allowed gravity to yank him into the oversized chair. It was a tad too comfortable for his liking. But discarding such opinions to the wayside when a porcelain cup covered in chocobos and other cartoonish figures floated across the room into his waiting fingers, steam wafting from the liquid sloshing back and forth yet never spilling over the side, he settled down.

"Much better, if I do say so myself."

He had to give Satsuki proper credit. Her personal blend, although rather bitter with a hint of tang, was rather delectable. And delicious. Not as good as some of the rarer blends out in the realm. But with the Heartless and other monsters lurking amongst the shadows, he wasn't in the mood to fight through hordes of ravenous fiends for a few simple tea leaves.

But no matter how grim the situation, he *refused* to drink coffee or those new-age energy drinks!

"Now, what's this I hear about you having a Keyblade?"

A chunk of turkey, lettuce and bread nearly flew out of Sora's mouth.

"You know about my Keyblade?"

"Many years ago, long before tutoring a rambunctious Yen Sid, I wielded a Keyblade. Master Merlin they called me. With Star Seeker in hand and a strong heart, I protected the worlds from those seeking to exploit the darkness," Merlin took another sip of tea, which refilled itself thanks to a pinch of magic, "But all good things must eventually come to an end. These days I'm nothing more than a sorcerer traveling the worlds, collecting model airships and teaching those willing to learn a few things about magic."

"Huh. How old are - ouch!"

A sharp elbow to his ribs stopped Sora mid-question, "Hey! What was that for?"

"Show some respect!"

Pulling back his elbow while huffing underneath his breath, Donald flat-out ignored Sora's childish protests, "He's Merlin! Not some random person off the street!"

"It's quite alright."

Tapping a teaspoon against the cup, steam wafting from the bitter liquid cresting but never spilling over, Merlin chuckled, his voice as airy as a feather, "Sora's not the first to inquire about my age. But to be perfectly honest, I stopped counting after my one hundredth birthday. Far too many candles to blow out."

"Really?"

The sorcerer accepted Sora's disbelief with a knowing wink, "Who needs a young body when the old mind can take any form it desires? Magic is limitless, even more so than light and darkness. Alright, I believe you asked how I knew about your Keyblade?"

With a quick *clap-clap* of his wand against the table, the bag resting at the foot of his chair scurried into reach, "Wizards such as myself tend to see things most people overlook. Such as hearing about a strange youth with a Keyblade who stopped a dangerous Heartless before it could rampage across town. Good work, by the way. I'm certain Leon appreciates the lack of collateral damage, something that usually follows Ryuko's more calamitous exploits."

"Well, I didn't do it alone."

Maybe it was just him, but Sora found the praise embarrassing, "Donald and Goofy helped. I couldn't have beaten that thing without them even with the Keyblade."

"Oh ho-ho! No need to be humble, my boy. I'm sure that... hold on! By George! That confounded whatsit should be right here!"

Leaning sideways, Merlin grunted and mumbled as he physically struggled against some unspeakable horror imprisoned within the carpet bag. Magic crackled through the air. Streams of light and darkness detonated in awe-inspiring fireworks. And as Sora, Donald and Goofy watched, confused and mildly concerned, two of them reaching for more food while never looking away, the sorcerer abruptly stumbled over the other side of the chair, spectacles askew and conical hat lightly singed.

"Good heavens!"

An ear-splitting noise similar to rocks tumbling down cliffsides but with the distinct overtone of amused mockery launched Merlin back to his feet, "The dragon eggs hatched sooner than expected."

Now *this* wasn't expected. Not one bit! The blasted lizards shouldn't have hatched for another few weeks. He really needed to deal with the nesting reptiles before they burned a hole through his bag. But that was a problem for later. Sooner rather than later. Maybe in a couple of hours to a day or two. With a swish of wand and accompanying flick of his wrist, the sorcerer silenced the infernal laughter. Followed by a *woosh*. Then a loud *crash* as pink and purple flames abruptly reversed direction, rushing back into the carpet bag, which snapped shut.

"I should've known! Dragons are mostly extinct in this day and age for a reason!"

After *firmly* locking his bag, and enchanting it a tad more fireproof than usual, he brushed soot and ash from his robe, "By the way, I do believe you have something for me. A certain book, perhaps?"

"I do?"

In all the excitement... or maybe confusion was a better word... Sora nearly forgot he was still holding the book Cid gave them. Only it was covered in bread crumbs and bits and pieces of cookies, which he quickly wiped away, "Oh, right! Cid wanted us to give this to you."

"Thank you, my boy."

With a swish of his wand, Merlin magicked the innocuous tome out of Sora's hand. Carried upon wisps of imagination and currents of thought and belief, the recently-repaired book quickly floated towards the small table perched beneath the nearby window, "Give Cid my best regards for a job well done, won't you?"

"Sure thing, mister Merlin, sir."

Goofy reached for another sandwich, "But if ya don't mind us asking, what's so special about that book?"

"Oh, hm, you know, to be perfectly honest, I don't know myself."

Merlin shrugged off the question as the tea kettle refilled his empty cup without so much as a second thought, "The book's not even mine. I found it, you see, during my travels some years ago. It just appeared inside my bag one day. And thanks to Ryuko and her sister's help, most of the missing pages are right back where they belong. Do take a look inside when you have the time. I'm certain you'll learn something useful. The others certainly did."

"Others?"

Something about that word bothered Sora, "Like... Ryuko, right?"

"Oh, heavens no!"

Laughing under his breath at the boy's innocuous question, Merlin ignored the horrendous memories surfacing inside his heart. Ten years. Had it really been a decade already? Nearly an entire generation of Keyblade wielders lost to the darkness. Only by the skin of her teeth and the uniqueness of her physiology had Ryuko survived the confrontation with Xehanort and Ardyn Lucis Caelum.

"I offered her the chance to read the book, but she turned me down."

Tap! Tap! Tap!

"Err, now then..."

He lightly tapped his wand three times against the table. Once per required furnishing. A rightward flick of his wrist gathered the proper amount of magic into existence. And another swish orchestrated an appropriate number of chairs from the attic, which danced and floated above their heads before aligning themselves at right angles to his own, "Since we have a little time, I'd like to hear about your adventure. The worlds you've visited. And anything peculiar you might have seen."

"Our adventure, huh?"

While Goofy and Donald accepted Merlin's hospitality, Sora scratched the back of his neck, "Where do you want me to start?"

"Anywhere, my boy."

"Well, alright, I guess."

Collapsing into the only remaining chair, he rolled his tongue around his mouth. Anywhere he wanted, huh? There was *so much* to talk about. Wonderland. Thebes. And that strange jungle with Tarzan and Jane. So many things happened, where could he possibly start? For what felt like an eternity, he didn't know what to do or say. But after Merlin poured himself another cup of tea, he decided on the best thing to start off the conversation.

"Um... let's see..."

A huff passed through his teeth, "There was this villain. He called himself Exdeath or something. And -"

"PFFFFTTTT!!!"

Chapter 13.3

Confidence: *Me? Scared? Ha! Don't make me laugh! I don't know what's gotten into yer heads, but I'm the great Pete! Strongest man in the worlds!*

~Pete~

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/d/d5/A_Castle_Wrapped_in_Thorns_02_KHBBS.png/800px-A_Castle_Wrapped_in_Thorns_02_KHBBS.png]

"What a dump."

He couldn't give a buzzard's behind about this rundown world. It was boring. Dull. And a bunch of other words, "Still, this beats bein' cooped up in that castle."

It wasn't like he had anything against Hollow Bastion. The castle was fantastic. A fortress where they could plot and plan and scheme without worrying about those annoying Keyblade wielders ruining their day. Or Ryuko breaking through one wall after another without slowing down. Thanks to Maleficent, not to mention the super-smart genius who ruled the place before them, there were enough magical and sciency doohickeys that if he wasn't her right-hand man, he'd sell them on the black market and retire to some tropical world. Strength and money controlled everything. If you had power - and by power, he meant strength - you could do anything you wanted.

"The fresh air's sorta nice."

Like ruling the worlds!

"But, uh, something's really buggin' me."

More than a little confused by the sorceress's silence, especially considering she'd been barking orders left and right back at the castle, Pete scratched behind his ear, "Not to complain or nuttin', but ain't ya worried the pipsqueak's gonna -"

"Quiet, you idiot!"

Heralded by a resoundingly sharp *clack*, her staff slammed against the ground, interrupting the buffoon's incessant prattling before the wasted breath finished leaving his lungs, "Can you remember *nothing!?*"

The shadows trembled underneath the majesty of her presence. Darkness rushed down empty streets, stretching across the slumbering world, seeking purchase within hearts weaker than her own. Hushed whispers stilled upon the air, daring neither to speak nor reveal themselves. The tranquility was nauseating. Now more than ever, fools existed throughout the worlds. And of those fools, several believes themselves protectors. Self-proclaimed guardians for those whose worlds succumbed to darkness. And all due to the Keyblade. Or perhaps the legend surrounding the weapon.

If only she could control said weapon's power for herself.

But illusions of dominance lay shattered by the limp making it exceptionally difficult to place too much weight on her right leg.

"We cannot afford to obtain notoriety."

Unconcerned by whatever half-formed thoughts - if such meandering streams of consciousness could be considering *thinking* - lurked within the half-wit's skull, Maleficent marched forward. No matter what the moron believed, they needed to proceed with utmost caution. To move *carefully*. This world, despite illusionary promises of security and protection by those imbecilic and naïve children, was home to the great Merlin. Her magic might rival - no, more than exceeded - the sorcerer's, but the elderly fool possessed far more experience fighting darkness and those who've mastered its power.

It was Merlin, not herself, who confronted the Cloud of Darkness alongside Beatrix and his students without suffering more than minor injuries.

It was the sorcerer, decades removed from the present, who defeated the sorceress Ultimecia.

Not that she *couldn't* defeat Merlin. Nobody was invincible. Not herself. Not so-called gods. And certainly not that abhorrent woman. Such feats, among many others, simply adjourned consideration until destiny forced her hand. Eventually she *would* confront Merlin and the dithering fool's allies. She possessed no delusion otherwise. It was only a matter of preparing herself. And gathering the necessary ingredients to ensure things were tilted in her favor.

"Either lower your voice or I shall ensure you cannot speak."

Dissonant serenity smoothed her façade into a porcelain mask. It would be triflingly simple. A mere pittance. With nothing more than the barest effort, she could permanently silence the moronic buffoon until such time as she desired hearing his voice replicate fingernails clawing their way down chalkboards, "Is. That. Clear?"

"Oh... I, uh, sorry 'bout that."

Pete knew that threatening voice like the back of his hand. It spelled trouble. Lots of it. Probably for him. Or the next sucker who crossed their paths. If he wasn't careful, Maleficent might zap him into next week, "But ain't ya worried he's gonna leave with that other brat? Or blab everything to Ryuko?"

"Do you honestly believe I haven't considered both possibilities?"

"Well, I....um, you have?"

"Of course. His defection is a distinct possibility."

Emerald light danced between her fingers. Hints of beryl, aquamarine and other colors, tainted dark by unfathomable darkness, illuminated the manicured digits in ways impossible for normal sunlight. But just as quickly as the extravagant display earned the moron's attention, she clenched her fingers, snuffing the brilliant magic crackling like sickly green flames from the face of existence.

"One I've already taken into consideration."

It had been nothing more than a name cursorily dropped in the midst of conversation.

After the imbecile accompanied the poor boy to her chambers, Heartless eagerly seeking to devour his Heart yet kept at bay by *her* darkness and unquenchable and undeniable thirst for power, she'd inquired about his world. His past. Where he came from. And how he ended upon arriving upon her world. Only one whose heart was steeped in darkness possessed the capacity to reach the former bastion of light and hope. The corridors didn't simply open for anyone. That someone, particularly an ordinary child, traveled through such corridors had piqued her curiosity.

But instead of shock or confusion, the boy demanded passage to Lindblum, blabbering about his friends and family.

And how Ryuko Matoi could help find them.

Only *patience* stayed her hand that day.

Or rather, another name the boy offhandedly mentioned.

"Ya don't say..."

Slowly scratching one particular spot behind his ear, Pete considered what Maleficent was saying. Far be it for him to complain, but her plan didn't make a lick of sense. The pipsqueak personally knew Ryuko. Like, friend-like. Master and student. That sort of thing.

Which was a huge, ginormous problem. Not just for him, but for their grand scheme. He might not be a super-smart genius or have a fancy-shmancy degree, but he knew his way around the universe. A strong and strapping man such as himself didn't survive long without knowing one or two things. And keeping the brat around was more likely to bite them in the behind than the Keyblade Masters giving up without a fight.

"Hey!"

As they passed underneath a streetlight, moths and other bugs flying right into his face, he rubbed his chin, "If the pipsqueak's that much trouble, why not turn him into a Heartless?"

The almost unnoticeable tightening of the sorceress's fingers around her staff quickly sent sweat dripping down the back of his neck.

"Err... never mind! Forget I asked!"

However, instead of belittling or insulting the buffoon, Maleficent continued walking, tattered robe sweeping across the ground.

"We already control thousands of the creatures."

As much as she desired ignoring the buffoon's question, he raised a valid point. It *would* be easier drowning the boy's heart in darkness. Given his association with that contemptible and vile woman, she would have *cherished* every agonizing scream. His pleas for mercy would have been music to her ears. A symphony of pain and suffering unmatched by anything past, present or future. And once his heart succumbed to darkness and shadows, she would have sent him after the wretched Keyblade Master. One final insult to ensure the woman never forgot what she'd wrought.

"One more won't make any difference."

Her gaze swept across the streets, settling briefly upon a quaint shop, windows darkened, wares and other items pale shadows of

themselves, "No, the boy would be far more useful as an ally."

Staring forward into the approaching darkness, her painted lips curled into an expression somewhere between sadistic amusement and monstrous levity. Endless oceans of shadows dwelled within her heart. And through that primordial power, far superior to the light cherished by those too weak and powerless to embrace their true nature, Maleficent's bemused sigh baffled the unintelligent oaf.

"Unfortunately, his heart has proven rather stubborn to my usual methods."

Every footstep was deathly silent. Unnoticeable. Only her breath, faint whispers upon the stilled atmosphere, gave away her presence. As she strolled down the dark street, tattered robe dragging against the ground in her wake yet never growing dirtied nor torn, Maleficent's eyes subtly narrowed, "Moving too quickly would arouse unnecessary suspicion. If our new friend is to pull his weight, his heart must be carefully molded. The light must be weeded out, leaving nothing but a forest of thorns where darkness prevails. Brute force will not work. No, to accomplish my long-awaited goals, a gentle touch is required."

"A gentle touch, huh?"

Pete didn't have the foggiest clue what Maleficent was talking about, "I suppose that makes sense."

"When he arrived on our doorstep, the boy demanded the truth."

Her voice possessed an underlying coldness. A tranquil fury that her compatriot, useful due to the strength of his heart rather than anything intellectual, missed. If she could replace him with someone far more competent, she would do so in a heartbeat. But with manicured fingers caressing the crystalline orb atop her staff, she refocused her thoughts, irritation concealed beneath a porcelain mask, "He wished to know what horrid fate befell his world. And why,

despite my powerful magic, I couldn't bring him to Ryuko. All of which I graciously answered. With a few caveats, of course."

"Caveats..."

The former boat-captain was, not for the first time since leaving the castle, befuddled, "Oh! Like pretendin' yer name is Cara... um... Cara..."

"*Carabosse*."

How a slow-witted idiot such as himself survived so long without starving to death defied comprehension.

"Can't you remember something so trivially simple?"

"Sorry, Mal... err... *Carabosse*."

Swallowing the large lump in his throat, Pete folded his arms over each other, fear of getting zapped by magic surrendering to confusion, "Anyway, why are we bendin' over backwards for this brat? He ain't nothin' but a useless pipsqueak! He doesn't even have a Keyblade!"

"On the contrary, the boy possesses quite a bit of usefulness."

Her mouth twisted into an irritated glower at the moron's inability to understand anything, "Ansem wrote about a young girl. A child whose heart lacked darkness. A vessel containing pure light. And nothing but. I'm not certain. Not quite yet. But it's quite possible the girl our young acquaintance seeks is this same child. A Princess of Heart."

Magic muffled their voices. A simple trick purposely concealed from the imbecile, lest he start believing it appropriate to shout. She was *so close*. Kingdom Hearts was almost within her grasp. If the girl's heart was indeed pure, completely devoid of darkness, only one princess would remain. And once they were found, the infinite power

and knowledge of Kingdom Hearts would be hers! Darkness would spread across the worlds, extinguishing love, hope and light from existence! There would be nothing capable of stopping her!

Not even those contemptible parasites!

"Which would leave but one final pure heart to gather."

It looked trivial. Effortless And perhaps it was. But with a single *tap* of her finger, dark light flickered within the emerald jewel perched atop her staff. Reality shifted and space became nothing more than cloth spun between her nimble fingers. Leaning forward slightly, she gazed into the hazy smoke, peering across space, where a silver-haired boy sprinted into the distance, daemonic falchion slicing apart any Heartless unfortunate enough to stand between himself and what he truly desired.

"Yet his trust remains painfully elusive."

"Why that no-good little..."

Pete stared at the jewel but saw nothing but glowing smoke, "And after you've been nuttin' but nice to the irritating pipsqueak!"

"Indeed..."

Shadowy light, tainted sickly green by darkness, danced across the amused sorceress's visage, "It's most perplexed. Perhaps a small remnant of Ryuko's influence guides his heart. Or perhaps the boy's naturally headstrong and stubborn. Even after demonstrating *proof* his valued best friend was traveling with the King's incompetent lackeys, companions to replace himself and the girl called Kairi, he refuses to accept the truth."

Mirthful laughter resonated from the abyssal depths of her heart as she remembered, all too fondly, the boy's *desperation* to speak with Sora.

"To shatter the illusions enslaving his heart..."

Painted lips quirked, cruel mockery twisting her expression into something *vile*.

"... he must witness cold reality. And all such experience entails."

"Heh..."

Punching one hand into the other, the former boat-captain's grin was obnoxious, "That's why you decided the pipsqueak was ready for an old-fashioned reunion, ain't it?"

"Precisely."

Maleficent's black-horned headdress swallowed what little light dared struggle against the darkness. It illuminated the malevolent grin stretching across her fair and green-skinned face. And confessed the hundreds of yellow eyes concealed within the shadows, awaiting her orders to consume hearts, "If everything proceeds as planned, the boy's friendship will be irrevocably broken. The process won't be instantaneous. Nothing truly is. It will take time. But without his friends, he'll have no choice but to come crawling back to me."

"Gwahahahaha!"

The buffoon's incessant laughter once again grated upon her nerves, "The stupid brat's gonna be like putty once yer done with him!"

"A crude comparison, but accurate."

It was abhorrent. The moron's existence tested her patience like nothing else. If not for his usefulness and strange resilience to darkness, she'd have long discarded him for someone with more than a shred of intelligence. But when he stopped guffawing, almost *too* quickly, her brows furrowed, "Do you have something *else* to say?"

"Well... uh... it's just..."

Scratching his chin, he glanced back and forth, looking for someone who wasn't there, "Ain't we taking a big risk comin' here? I, uh, know she's way across the cosmos doin' Keyblade stuff, but Ryuko's not a normal broad. She's made of those threads. Strings. Life Fibers or whatever they're called. Ain't ya worried she's gonna come swooping in out of nowhere and mess everything up?"

A flash of emerald flames nearly sizzled his fur.

"Are you *doubting* me?"

"N-No!"

"Then quit your sniveling!"

With a dismissive flourish of her staff, Maleficent dissipated the dark magic, leaving the ungrateful moron cowering at nothing. How dare he! How dare he presume himself anything her superior! She was the mistress of all evil! That a half-wit *dared* address her in such a manner couldn't be ignored! But pragmatism stayed her hand. And deigning neither to speak to him directly nor acknowledge any further questions, she snarled, teeth slightly bared, "An opportunity has presented itself. One we cannot afford to ignore. One you will accomplish or incur my unbridled fury!"

"Don't worry, Mal... I mean, Carabosse! You can count on me!"

Snapping a salute, maybe a little too sloppy considering he was out of practice, Pete hurried after Maleficent when the sorceress moved on without him, "Uh, what do ya want me to do?"

"According to my sources, Ryuko's sister... Satsuki Kiryuin... has departed Lindblum for the foreseeable future."

Caw! Caw!

Soaring above darkened rooftops, Diablo cawed thrice more before gently landing upon her shoulder. As long as she drew breath, Diablo was her eyes and ears. Her loyal pet served as a scout. A means of observing others when her presence would do more harm than good. Such as ensuring the youth found his way through winding streets and alleys towards his long-lost friend.

"While I watch over the boy, you will command several thousand Heartless and assault Lindblum."

Diablo momentarily spread his wings when she scratched the underside of his beak. The raven, far more useful and productive than the imbecilic moron, gave the buffoon a withering glare, blood red eyes unblinking, as painted lips stretched into a broad smile, "Of course, I have little doubt they'll lose. However, assuming she's on Alexandria, it should take Beatrix somewhere between ten to fifteen minutes to arrive. During that time, while the regent's soldiers are busy protecting the civilians, you're going to search Ryuko's home for the other half of her scissor swords. Understood?"

"Sure thing!"

Pete's grin matched the witch's sadistic smile, even as a bead of cold sweat rolled down the back of his neck, "I'll bring that fancy-shmancy weapon of hers back to ya lickety-split! No problem! It'll be a piece of cake!"

Chapter 13.4

There really isn't much to say. This is one of those scenes which come from the game, but I tried making the dialogue more organic and believable. Less stilted, if you catch my drift. Enjoy.

"So, that Exdeath fella wasn't Exdeath?"

Scratching the bottom of his chin, Goofy mulled over what Merlin said about the so-called imposter. At first, the sorcerer had been worried. But after Sora explained what happened on Thebes, suddenly, like someone flipped a switch, the guy was sagging in his chair. Still, he was awfully curious about temporal paradoxes and alternate realities, even if just thinking about those sorts of things gave him a headache, "Who do you think he was?"

"Who cares!"

As the wind picked up, whistling through the alleyway, Sora laced both hands against the back of his neck and grinned, "We kicked his sorry butt and nobody got hurt. That's a win in my book!"

"Humph!"

Donald grumbled under his breath. But his irritation had nothing to do with almost stepping on a half-rotten, week-old banana peel. Not even when something unmistakably similar to partially liquified fruit stuck to his foot, "You better start learning how to properly use that Keyblade! No more excuses, got it?"

"Aw, come on, Donald!"

No matter what it sounded like, Sora didn't whine. He wasn't a kid. He simply expressed his annoyance as they stepped out of the strangely-magical alley leading from Merlin's house back to the courtyard where that enormous armored Heartless with the

detachable arms and legs tried pounding him into the ground,
"Maybe I need a little practice, but I beat that guy, didn't I?"

Mildly irritated by the childish excuse, Donald waved his staff towards Sora.

"Thanks to me and Goofy!"

Now more than a little annoyed by the wizard's refusal to believe he wasn't the same novice who had trouble fighting a handful of small Heartless, Sora pushed the knotted wooden away from his cheek,
"That's not how I remember it."

"Then your memory's lousy!"

"Gawrsh, Donald."

Choosing to add his own two cents to the conversation, which was turning into another argument over something that didn't really matter, Goofy tapped his chin, "Not ta be rude or anything, but I think Sora's right. Without his Keyblade, we might've never defeated that Exdeath imposter."

An eyebrow twitched.

"Oh, forget it!"

With a noticeably deep grunt, Donald pushed his frustrations to the deepest, darkest depths of his heart. And then locked away the key. What was the point arguing with them? He'd have an easier time single-handedly defeating every Heartless across the Realm of Light with one hand tied behind his back and without magic, "Let's just find Leon and - "

Sora saw them first.

Accompanied by soft *whooshes* and the weird feeling something eerily cold brushing against his heart, more than two dozen Heartless, each wearing identical bluish-black body suits

emblazoned with heart-shaped emblems, silver helmets obscuring everything but pure blackness and glowing yellow eyes, emerged from the darkness. Purple miasma clung to their instinctive existences as they tore through the barrier separating light and darkness. Drawn towards the Keyblade, lured across reality by its bearer's heart, the Heartless immediately lurched forward, red-tipped claws trailing darkness and shadows.

"Get ready!"

Reacting purely upon instinct, Sora snapped out his arm, light sparking around his fingers. A few dozen Heartless weren't a big deal, especially the soldier-like ones constantly following them across the worlds. But before the Keyblade appeared, during that short moment where his fingers held something not quite real yet still not a dream, somewhere on the roofs above them, a potted plant rolled down a rooftop onto a small window patio and shattered, causing a tan and orange tabby cat to hiss and yowl.

"What the -?"

He barely noticed it spinning through the darkness, a red and dark blue blur against the full moon.

But a razor-sharp sword, dark red leather-like metal stretching between ominous purple spines, a dark blue jewel resembling a cat's eye embedded above its hilt, sliced through one of the Heartless, causing both halves of the confused creature to fall sideways.

"HAH!!!"

They didn't expect anything less from the foul monsters.

Especially abominations incapable of feeling emotions and empathy.

One sneaker landed upon their falchion, driving the weapon deeper into the pavement. As the Heartless recovered, rushing through the decaying remnants of their brethren without batting an eye, he bent

his knee and *pushed*, vaulting backwards over the charging monsters. But not high enough where he couldn't reach out, grab Soul Eater and yank the weapon out of the ground. A sudden and forcible change of momentum that allowed him to flip forward, landing on his feet and slice through another Heartless. But it wasn't enough. Not by a long shot.

Green eyes steadily narrowed as the Heartless rapidly dissipated into shadows, returning to the Realm of Darkness to reform and eventually seek out innocent hearts. Lips pulled into a scowling snarl. Then he gasped. And quickly pivoted, lurching around red-tipped claws, darkness barely missing his shirt when the creature moved faster than expected. Countering and parrying the chaotic and random assault, metal clanged against metal. It seemed one-sided. Yet slowly and steadily, experience overwhelmed raw numbers. Training overpowered animalistic strength.

And with a series of rapid strikes and crisscross slashes, shadowy light trailing from Soul Eater's edge, he destroyed the remaining Heartless.

Leaving only one piece of unfinished business.

"What's wrong, Sora?"

As the final Heartless faded into darkness, leaving behind nothing but memories and tense silence, Riku turned around, shoulders rising and falling between panting breaths, "Surprised to see me?"

"Wha... Riku?"

Sora couldn't believe it.

His mind and heart collided, leaving him short of breath and light-headed. His fingers tingled. His heart raced. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he reached out, fingers opening and closing before his arm limply fell to the side. It seemed too good to be real. Was this another dream? Was Riku really here? Or was he nothing more than

a figment of his imagination like with Kairi? More than anything, he wanted to believe Riku defeated those Heartless. But he couldn't be certain. They sounded like Riku. They had his confidence and bluster. But after Wonderland, Thebes and the jungle, there was only *one way* to know if he really was Riku.

"Hey!"

Riku rubbed his shoulder, surprised, and more than a little impressed, by Sora punching him out of the blue, "What was that for?"

"Sorry!"

It felt like a weight dropped from his heart. And relief. Followed by pain when Riku punched him in the shoulder. But a little pain didn't stop Sora from grinning like he'd been caught sneaking snacks out of the fridge, "Had to make sure I wasn't dreaming this time."

"I hope not," Riku snorted under his breath, "Because saving your butt from Heartless would make for a pretty lousy dream."

"Who cares about a stupid dream!"

Maybe he sounded like an idiot. But who cared about something like that! This really was Riku! His best friend really was here. Smiling wide enough that his cheeks stung, Sora slouched forward, hands propped on his knees, nervous exhaustion causing everything to spin. Yet he laughed. He smirked. Excitement bubbled inside his heart. And with far more energy than he actually possessed, he shouted, "I'm just glad you're alright! But... uh... how'd you find me?"

"Trust me. It wasn't easy."

With a tired sigh, Riku sheathed Soul Eater into the scabbard latched onto his back, "Ryuko wasn't exaggerating when she claimed every star in the sky was another world."

"Ugh, tell me about it."

Like a marionette whose strings had been severed, Sora's head fell forward, "And they're so much bigger than the islands."

Everything still felt unreal, almost like he'd open his eyes any second and find Goofy snoring loud enough to keep Donald from sleeping. But Riku was here. And he found his thoughts returning to that fateful night. The sky opening. The storm tearing down trees. Shadows twisting along the ground. Heartless attacking everything and everyone. Riku rushing into his house shouting about seeing Kairi on Besaid Island. The massive Heartless with a heart-shaped hole in its chest shattering Besaid Island as everything they knew disappeared into the void.

Kairi vanishing in his arms.

Riku falling into the darkness

The Keyblade appearing out of nowhere.

"Kairi's not with you, is she?"

He blinked, snapping back to reality when Riku continued talking, neon signs casting strange patterns across their bodies, "Come on, what's wrong? From the way you were talking a mile a minute, I figured Kairi was staying with Ryuko or Satsuki or even Mako."

"No..."

Sora winced as something in his heart nearly broke, "I... I haven't found her."

It was difficult to tell if he really saw something or it was nothing more than his imagination. But for a moment, Riku seemed... different. Angry. At him. At Ryuko. At everyone. It didn't feel right. It didn't *look* right. But if he was being truly honest with himself, Sora couldn't blame Riku. They'd known Kairi for as long as he could

remember. She was their friend. She was the one who whacked them over the heads with a stick whenever they came up with stupid and crazy ideas. Like daring each other to touch a red chocobo's egg.

"Hey, I'm sure Kairi's all right."

Although his heart clenched, Riku smiled in a way that didn't quite reach his eyes, "She's probaly out there saving worlds from the Heartless. Maybe with a Keyblade like Ryuko."

"You think so?"

Folding his hands against the back of his neck, lips pursed together, Sora tried contemplating Kairi rushing into hordes of Heartless, swinging her Keyblade while screaming profanities about kicking darkness's ass. But he couldn't see it. Not that she couldn't have a Keyblade. But that she wouldn't act like Ryuko after Tidus's dad tried hijacking her Gummi Ship for a joyride.

"Stranger things have happened."

Caw! Caw!

Somewhere close enough to be heard, but far enough that its screeching pitch echoed several times before fading into silent obscurity, a bird cawed. A familiar bird. And Riku almost looked over his shoulder. That was Carabosse's raven. If he was here, that meant Carabosse wasn't too far away. But why was she still here? He could've sworn she returned to Hollow Bastion.

"Anyway, you hungry?"

Jabbing a thumb towards the stairs across the courtyard, he pushed those thoughts out of mind. Carabosse might've given him shelter, food and information about the universe and Heartless. But he didn't plan on sticking around the sorceress any longer than necessary, "I saw this place on the way over. Looked pretty fancy. My -"

"LOOK OUT!!!"

He reacted before the tall and lanky knight finished shouting. Throwing his center of mass sideways, hand reaching over his shoulder to Soul Eater, Riku watched, eyes narrowing, as several Heartless peeled off nearby shadows, using the darkness to form their own existences. Twisted antennae twitched. Beady yellow eyes swiveled within pools of pure and thick darkness. No taller than his waist, the shadows didn't look nearly as menacing as the previous group. Or the literal ocean of powerful Heartless surrounding Hollow Bastion. But that didn't mean they weren't dangerous.

There was no such thing as a harmless Heartless.

He'd seen what happened to people who underestimated even the smallest Heartless.

"Tch!"

Tightening his grip around Soul Eater, knuckles bleeding white from the pressure, he backpedaled, grimacing between clenched teeth, when a Heartless leapt out of the ground where his shadow had been. But before he could counter, slicing through the damned creature, someone *brushed* against his shoulder.

"I got this!!!"

In seconds, the battle was over.

And a few seconds after that, Riku's mind caught up with the rest of his body.

He blinked. Then blinked again. Then he shook his head. He didn't know what happened, but Sora had rushed into the approaching horde... and sliced through Heartless after Heartless with a gold and silver sword resembling an oversized skeleton key. One that *killed* Heartless instead of simply banishing them to the Realm of Darkness. But as the last creature faded into nothingness and

darkness, leaving Sora standing alone, slightly out of breath but unharmed, Riku's confusion transformed into surprise.

"Sora, how the hell do you have a Keyblade?"

Instead of immediately answering the question, Sora stared at the legendary blade in his hand.

"Oh this?"

But just as quickly, he propped the Keyblade between his shoulder and neck, grinning proudly from ear to ear, "Guess this means I'm going to become a Keyblade Master before you."

Riku knew he should have been insulted.

Yet all he did was shake his head.

"Well, it's about time you beat me at *something*."

It was embarrassing. And a little pathetic if he really thought about it. Out of everything in the world, Sora somehow got a Keyblade first? How was that possible? Ryuko didn't really talk about her job besides kicking Heartless butt and fighting against the forces of darkness, but she claimed the Keyblade was a huge responsibility. Not everyone could just pick one off the ground. You had to be special. But here Sora was, holding a Keyblade like it was natural. And no matter how hard he tried denying it, he needed to face the truth.

Sora's Keyblade was awesome.

Maybe not as cool-looking as Threadcutter. Or Tidus's dad's sword. But a pretty close third or fourth.

"Because constantly beating your sorry butt was getting boring."

Brushing off Sora's attempt at a comeback, he reached out, fingers opening before the thought crossed his mind, "You mind?"

"Sure, just don't break it."

"You don't trust me?"

Riku regretted asking the question when Sora's arm pulled backwards a few inches, "Come on, when have I ever broken something?"

"... eh..."

"That wasn't my fault."

Okay, maybe Sora had a point. But after quickly apologizing for something that clearly *wasn't* his fault, and then promising to be extra careful, he handed over the Keyblade, much to the duck's weird and bizarre frustration. At first glance, it didn't look that special. A little strange and awkward to hold. A little longer than Soul Eater. Bulkier, too. Yet something else drew his attention. Something that caused him to hold the Keyblade in front of his eyes, staring at his wavering reflection on the polished metal.

"Looks pretty cool."

It felt... right, for lack of a better word. He didn't know. He couldn't explain *how* he knew. But in his heart, the Keyblade felt perfect. Almost like it was meant for him. Which made less sense. But compared to the Soul Eater, which Carabosse claimed harnessed his emotions and inner darkness without tainting his heart, which he didn't trust for a second, the Keyblade weighed almost nothing. It had *weight*. Something its size had to weigh a lot. Too much for Sora to swing around without quickly falling on his butt. Even so, despite its cumbersome appearance, it felt lighter than air, "Of course, it's nowhere near as cool-looking as Ryuko's Keyblade."

"Hey!"

"I'm kidding. Geez, you lose your sense of humor or something," he playfully scoffed before swinging his arm forward, "Here. Catch."

Clang!

And, of course, Sora *dropped* the Keyblade. If it wasn't so embarrassing, he might've actually laughed, "But let's get one thing straight. When I get *my* Keyblade, it's going to be twice as awesome as yours."

"Dream on!"

Matching his friend's smirk and then some, Sora picked up his Keyblade, dismissed it and jabbed a thumb against his chest, "As if your Keyblade's gonna be cooler than mine!"

"Whatever you say..."

"I'm serious!"

"I know you are."

The tension was palpable. Electricity crackled in the darkness between them. But then the taller figure standing behind Sora and to the left suddenly sneezed. And then sneezed twice more, complaining to the duck about allergies. And just like that, everything returned to normal. The tension vanished, deflating like a popped balloon. Riku smirked, shaking his head and chuckling at Sora's futile attempt at staring him down. If it didn't work back on the islands when Tidus's dad asked who replaced his blitzball with a rock painted like a blitzball, it wouldn't work now.

"So, you plan on introducing me sometime this century?"

Now that Sora gave up trying to prove his Keyblade was the best thing in the world, Riku motioned towards the sneezing knight, "Or are you going to leave me hanging?"

"Ahem!"

Donald cleared his throat with a hearty cough, "We are -"

"He's Donald. And he's Goofy," Sora interrupted, leaving the short-tempered wizard sputtering, "We've visited so many worlds looking for you. Not to mention all the people who've helped us.

"You don't say..."

Apprehension whispered against Riku's heart as he glanced aside, "It sounds like you've made a lot of friends."

"Pretty much!"

Scratching the back of his neck, Sora grinned, a somewhat embarrassed yet excited laugh brightening his smile. In hindsight, he should have noticed something was wrong. He should have kicked himself. Or punched himself. Or simply not said anything. But knowing Riku was all right, that maybe Kairi was out there, somewhere, waiting for them, threw caution to the wind, "The worlds are full of interesting people. They're not all good. Or bad. But they've helped me through some really tough spots. Without them, heh, I probably wouldn't be talking with you. Let's see, there's Leon and Aerith and Tarzan and... hmm..."

"Yer forgetting Alice and Jane," Goofy chimed in, "Not ta mention Yuffie and Merlin."

"And Hercules," Donald added, purposely leaving out Phil.

"Oh yeah."

Sora's excitement faltered before, with a sudden lurch, he resumed talking about the *really* important thing, "Anyway, you're coming with us, right? Donald has a Gummi Ship. Maybe it's not as awesome as Ryuko's..."

The mage's head whipped sideways.

"Says who!?"

"... but it's still pretty cool," he felt Donald glaring a hole through the back of his head, but with a confident smile, Sora grabbed Riku's hand, "C'mon! Let's find Kairi together! Just the four of us!"

"He can't come!"

The flat-out rejection surprised Sora, leaving him sputtering awkwardly, "What? What!?"

"I don't need to give a reason!"

Donald had *experience* dealing with children. Since they could waddle out of their cribs, Huey, Dewey, and Louie had been nightmares. Literal nightmares. Compared to them, Sora's childish whining didn't sway his mind. Not one bit, "The King left me in charge, so I get to make the rules! And I say he's not coming!"

"Why now?"

It didn't make any sense. Not at all! Riku was his best friend! He trusted Riku with his life, to always have his back. He hadn't come all this way, fighting tooth and nail against Heartless and powerful villains like Exdeath, just to give up and leave Riku behind, "Why can't he come with us?"

"Because I said so, that's why!"

"I know we're not supposed ta meddle with other worlds," Goofy added after a moment of careful thought and consideration, "But Riku doesn't have a world anymore. So maybe we can make an exception? Just this once? I'm certain the King would understand."

Donald knew when he was outnumbered. He didn't like it. Not one bit. There was a very good reason nobody was supposed to meddle with other worlds. Spreading knowledge about the Realm of Light, Keyblades and magic *always* did more harm than good. Like Ryuko. She didn't give a rat's tail about the rules. She did what she felt was right. And maybe that was good in the short run. But more often than

not, breaking the rules created trouble. Lots of trouble. And trouble always had a way to go around Ryuko and hit people like him squarely in the face.

It was *infuriating*.

"Alright! Fine!"

He immediately regretted his decision. It should have been obvious from a mile away. That expression. He knew that bouncing giddiness like the back of his hand. It meant loads and loads of trouble. For him. And just like that, a migraine beat against his temple. Ugh, were all Keyblade wielders like Sora or was the kid the exception? Because he couldn't remember Ventus or Aqua acting like this, "But NO more side trips, got it!? We have to find Master Ryuko and the King!"

"You hear that, Riku!?"

Everything besides 'alright' sailed over Sora's head as he spun around, grinning from ear to ear, "We're gonna -"

But they were alone.

"Huh?"

He was sort of confused. And maybe a little bewildered. One moment Riku was standing next to Sora and the next he was gone. Poof. Almost like magic. Slowly scratching his forehead with the blunt edge of his shield, Goofy voiced his confusion, "I wonder where he ran off too?"

Sora sprinted away from Donald and Goofy, running until every breath burned.

"RIKU!!!"

His lungs hurt.

"RIKU!!!"

His head swam.

"RIKU!!!"

Over and over again, without caring about drawing more Heartless toward their location, he shouted Riku's name at the top of his lungs. His heart pounded inside his chest. His vision blurred. But those problems didn't stop him from screaming until his voice grew hoarse. Until he could barely speak. Riku had to be nearby. His best friend had to be waiting around the corner. But as the adrenaline faded, leaving him trembling, tired and exhausted, nobody answered. There was only silence.

Silence and the sound of his own confusion.

"Where... did... he go?"

Hunched over, gasping for breath, the question was more of a whisper. A pained betrayal barely escaping his heart.

"Maybe he had important business."

Placing a hand upon Sora's shoulder, Goofy mulled over what to say, "At least ya know he's alright."

It didn't feel right. Not to him. Not right now. But as he stood alone in the plaza, surrounded by emptiness and silent buildings, nothing but his thoughts and loneliness beating against his heart, Sora pushed those terrible feelings aside.

"I guess so..."

Maybe Goofy had a point. Maybe he was overreacting. Sighing loudly, he rubbed his neck, chest tightening despite his best efforts to relax. If Riku escaped the islands, he needed to believe Kairi did too. It wasn't like they were strangers to the Realm of Light. Thanks to Ryuko, they knew lots of stuff about Lindblum and other worlds.

Maybe not a lot. And maybe not enough to really matter. But it was more than nothing. And that had to count.

"He could have at least said goodbye."

There was no point stewing about the problem. Even if it didn't make sense, and he didn't have answers, he needed to trust Riku. Riku wasn't the kind of guy to keep his emotions all bottled up. If something was wrong, if he said something upsetting, Riku would've told him.

"But next time I see Riku..."

As Goofy patted his back, offering much-needed encouragement, Sora shook his head, slapped his cheeks and huffed, "... I'm going to punch him. Harder. Unless he apologizes."

And that was that. He could think about Riku's reason for running off without saying goodbye later. Because right now, Leon and the others were probably still waiting for them. They just needed to find the address Cid wrote down. Which could be difficult thanks to helping Pooh and Piglet with the Hunny Tree. Because the piece of paper in his pocket was coated with layers and layers of honey. And sure, Merlin used magic to clean it off, but part of the address was smudged.

Heading up the stairs on the far side of the courtyard, one piece of honey-damaged paper held in hand, the other holding Donald's staff in front of his face, magical flames functioning as a makeshift flashlight, Sora never noticed the unmissable twinkle in the sky.

And a few moments later, upon turning several corners and heading back towards the First District, something unrelated to a meteorite shattered the sound barrier.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!"

Multiple pairs of arms and legs flailed wildly in the night. A red scarf fluttered around terror-stricken eyes. A string of curses unable to bear repeating around young and impressionable hearts echoed off nearby buildings. Yet his scream, one unbefitting for a swordsman of his renown, talent and fame, was justified. If anyone other than himself had found themselves magically teleported hundreds of feet above a slumbering world faster than they could sweep the floor with a short-tempered sorcerer of the mystic arts, they'd most likely wet their britches. Or faint. Or pray to some nonexistent god.

As for him?

Well, without enough time to contemplate his particularly *terrible* circumstances, let alone figure out a way to safely arrest his descent, Gilgamesh slammed face-first into the ground at something approaching terminal velocity.

"... ugh..."

Caw! Caw!

A bird cawed, its mockery at his unfortunate situation apparent, as he dragged his face out of the pavement.

"Curse that confounded wizard!"

Caw! Caw!

"This is why I don't like magic."

Despite his reasonable assumptions otherwise, it appeared Merlin hadn't quite forgotten his long-forgotten encounter with the Black Mage.

Bah! As if he'd surrender Galatyn!

Especially to someone claiming, without any evidence, to know its 'rightful' owner!

"At least he didn't transform me into a pigeon this time."

Pushing three pairs of knuckles into the ground squarely on either side of his enormous physique, Gilgamesh shook his head, removed the magical cobwebs, huffed derisively at what passed as common decency and faulted onto his feet. This was the final straw! Ryuko could blackmail and psychologically threaten him into darkness extinguished light, but no matter the consequence or punishment, he was never again stepping foot within the sorcerer's enchanted dominion. It simply wasn't worth the aggravation. Because even though he escaped with pride and life intact - *and* Galatyn in hand - there existed little doubt Merlin would inform his unreasonable apprentices.

And they, in turn, would tattle to the Keyblade Masters.

Which included Beatrix.

Leaving *him* to take the heat.

"Ugh, this simply isn't fair!"

A quick pat-down brushed away dust, dirt, debris, assorted shards of crystallized magic and splinters of enchanted wood from that annoying subservient animated brooms. He didn't like the prospect of encountering Beatrix in an alleyway, let alone a crowded street in the middle of the afternoon. But he had no choice. The prospect of trekking through the Realm of Darkness was the furthest thing from tantalizing. Perhaps foreboding or nerve-wracking painted a clearer and more precise mental landscape. But putting aside various synonyms pertaining to his frustration, in the end, it simply sucked. The Genji Armor might safeguard his heart, yet what lurked within the darkness was far more problematic than a few measly Heartless.

But refusing to assist Ryuko and the mouse meant a significant possibility of the former dragging him back to Alexandria, where upon Beatrix and that rusty knight would once again confiscate his collection.

"What to do. What to do."

He couldn't remember a more difficult decision.

Surrender the weapons he'd spent the better part of a decade painstakingly collection or proceed into the Realm of Darkness and nightmares waiting to devour his heart.

Two equally terrible and horrific choices.

Caw! Caw!

"Ugh, I just know I'm going to regret this."

It appeared without so much as a fancy wave of his hand or explosion of power. In mere moments, a corridor of darkness materialized upon the ground in front of his feet. A swirling portal of writhing shadows, purple miasma evaporating from its surface. No matter what anyone said, especially Ryuko and those other Keyblade Masters, this technique wasn't the so-called Corridors of Darkness used by Heartless, various villains and those funny people with matching coats. This was different. This was his own special ability, one he would never share with anyone, not even if his life depended upon it.

Caw! Caw!

"Hmm, Maleficent's in town. She's probably up to something nefarious..."

Folding three pairs of arms across his broad chest, Gilgamesh stepped forward, painted features scrunched in modest perturbation as he sank into the shadows.

"Oh well, not my problem."

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Unknown Report 13

Unknown Report 13

"I see..."

He felt *nothing*.

The unenlightened, those gifted by semblances of peace and security upon worlds secured against the darkness, believed emotions were nothing more than chemical reactions within one's limbic system and cerebral cortex. Responses evoked through proper stimuli. And to a certain extent, they would be correct. Lacking a heart did not mean one couldn't experience emotions. Or understand them. On the contrary, those without hearts, rejected by light and darkness alike, couldn't *feel* emotions. An important distinction. Sadness. Anger. Hatred. Happiness. And even the concept of mercy. Indeed, he remembered feeling such emotions.

Yet if he were to witness a valuable comrade's agonizing death, blood draining into the soil from their broken corpse, only annoyance would burgeon within the vast emptiness inside his chest.

"... this is *indeed* quite an unexpected surprise."

His voice lacked inflection, a somber baritone haunting the shadows.

It all seemed... pointless in the end. He could remember happiness swelling inside his heart. He could recall memories revolved around relief and nervousness, wondering if his research into memories would work. Or if it wouldn't. And yet, that was all it was. Nothing more than nostalgia. As one who teetered upon the edge of nothing, one step away from vanishing over the border separating light from darkness, though which directly he did not know, he lacked the means of connecting with others. 'Friend' was just a word lacking both meaning and influence.

No matter what he dreamt or remembered from his fragmented past, disjointed echoes lacking warmth, color and sound, he desired simply power.

Nothing more and nothing less.

"Yes, I was wondering why Demyx returned so quickly."

Success begot emptiness bereft of appreciation and exhilaration. Such was existence. And the heart's burden. Memories and hearts were irreversibly connected. As one matured and connected with others, memories engraved themselves upon their heart, strengthening and nurturing it. Hearts were linked to one another, an endless chain of friends and enemies stretching across the vastness of space. It was impossible to determine the first link of the chain, for such an origin didn't exist. But one wasn't necessary alongside the other. Nobodies such as himself were proof one could survive without their heart.

"However, despite whatever may unfold, our plans remain unchanged."

Twin silver drawstrings jingled against the emotionless figure's double-breasted trench coat as they smirked, a mirthless expression devoid of compassion, "Still, nothing would have pleased me more than to observe such an interesting battle. To witness the Keyblade's power. Now tell me. What is this Keyblade wielder's name?"

"Uh... Sora or something."

The outpouring of pure silence earned a quick clarification from the only other figure in the chamber.

"Hey, I'm just the messenger, alright?"

Symbols resembling inverted fleur-de-lis hearts and spiked crosses connected via glowing chains, black fading into white fading into gray, crisscrossed the Chamber of Reminiscence's walls and floor.

After they moved out of Hollow Bastion and the Heartless Manufactory became unnecessary for creating more and more Heartless, plus Maleficent taking over what remained of their home world, Xemnas, his so-called boss, ordered the Chamber of Repose moved to their new headquarters - The Castle That Never Was. Including the suit of armor and matching Keyblade currently propped against the farthest wall from the door like a severed marionette.

Why?

He didn't care enough to ask.

"This Sora kid defeating Exdeath... or someone pretending to be Exdeath... might pique your interest. Hell, I'm curious to see how the brat pulled it off myself. But I wouldn't celebrate victory just yet."

Xigbar, the self-proclaimed Freeshooter, sliced a finger crosswise through the air.

"Because it appears Sora knows Ryuko enough to throw her name around left and right."

While temporarily lacking a heart stopped him from *feeling* emotions, and pretty much everything else, the broad held a very special place in the list of people he wanted to personally take out. In fact, she was at the top of his list. The one person he wanted to kill more than anyone. An honor ten years running.

"So, I'm assuming their friends. The whole 'big sister and little brother' relationship. Hell, perhaps the brat's her student."

A lot of people desired immortality. Always for different reasons, but none of them truly understood how *long* eternity was. The years blended together. Months felt like hours. And years turned into weeks. You stopped counting your birthdays and pushed everyone away, knowing none of them would be around much longer. All in all, it *sucked*. He'd transferred his heart from vessel to vessel for two thousand years and counting, watching one Keyblade Master after

another pass along his former Keyblade to their pupil, interfering only when absolutely necessary while living with the shame of his single greatest failure.

He stopped being surprised centuries ago.

After a certain point, he simply wanted things to go back to how they used to be.

But then Ryuko Matoi exploded onto the scene like wild chocobos flocking through a china shop during mating season.

"And that's a *real* big problem."

Call it intuition. Or good, old-fashioned instinct mixed with millennia of hands-on experience. But far too often, when he brushed off missions under the excuse of being tired or bored or simply too lazy to help around the castle, he wondered if his master knew about Ryuko Matoi. He might not possess a Book of Prophecies for obvious reasons, such as innumerable temporal paradoxes tearing apart the fabric of space and time, but the broad was too *special* to have come out of goddamn nowhere. And then there were Life Fibers, parasites that not only thrived upon magic, but were almost impossible to destroy.

Did Ava and the others know about Ryuko?

Did they know about Life Fibers and everything that was happening up to, and including, this very moment?

Xigbar hoped they did. He *wished* the Books of Prophecies contained every last scrap of information about Life Fibers, including how to destroy them.

Because he didn't want to contemplate *alternate* implications.

"So, now what?"

An arrowgun manifested in his fingers before vanishing back into utter nothingness, "You got a plan for dealing with Sora?"

Silence reigned over their collective nonexistence as Xemnas closed his eyes.

"We shall do nothing."

Confusion, or something resembling the emotion, furrowed Xigbar's brow, "Nothing?"

"Yes. *Nothing.*"

The sheer authority of those words, uttered in a tone barely above a whisper, interrupted Xigbar's attempt at arguing the point. Which he found strange. Out of the twelve Nobodies filling their ranks, each coming from different origins but nevertheless concluding at the same point, his second-in-command should've found a hands-off approach relieving. They all knew of Ryuko Matoi, either through experience or knowledge. And yet the one individual who fought the Keyblade Master... who personally experienced the majesty of her eldritch abilities... was visibly perturbed.

An interesting quandary.

"Sora wields the Keyblade. However, his potential connection to Ryuko warrants caution."

How fortuitous that Demyx's mission to observe Maleficent's associate - the so-called Lord of the Underworld - evolved so unexpectedly. When Saix assigned the Melodious Nocturne to do so, he'd expected nothing more than another average report. Perhaps a bit of interesting news on the sorceress's search for the seven Princesses of Heart. He never anticipated something like *this*.

If he were capable of feeling even the slightest traces of emotion, he might've laughed.

"How do they know each other? Are they friends? Master and apprentice? Would she risk everything to save him? Or does he know her through mere happenstance?"

As the questions penetrated the intensifying silence, leading Xigbar to lean against the wall, arms folded and scars burning, Xemnas raised his arms, "Before committing ourselves to such a path, we must determine doing so does not inevitably lead Ryuko to our doorstep."

"Phew, well, that's a relief."

Xigbar almost immediately realized his mistake.

"Still, better to err on the safe side, right?"

The sniper rubbed the jagged scar running along the underside of his chin, a not-so-subtle reminder of *what* prematurely lowering his guard accomplishes, "I mean, pissing off Ryuko's a one-way ticket to an early grave. Hell, just ask Maleficent. Plus, whatever nonsense happened on Twilight Town. It sucks, but time and time again, Ryuko shouts loud and clear why she's the most dangerous bitch in the universe. Aside from standing in the way of our plans, of course. But hey, I'm just rambling. Shooting the breeze. If it comes down to it, I'm sure *you* could take her down."

If he heard the sarcasm, Xemnas didn't acknowledge it.

"Perhaps."

That wasn't the first time their Superior, the one who stood above the rest of them, who could empower or weaken any Nobody whenever he wished, acknowledged the difficulty of taking down Ryuko Matoi.

And it would not be the last.

"Or perhaps not."

Irritation, or rather a self-induced mockery of the emotion, spread across the eldest Nobody's face, "However, even if we emerged victorious, at least half, if not more, of our friends would undoubtedly perish. Our plans would be ruined. And further complicating matters, this scenario is predicated upon Ryuko marching to her own rhythm. Yet as we know, where she goes, Satsuki inevitably follows. The brilliant light to Ryuko's darkness. And following *her*, even disabled and retired, Beatrix would prove most difficult for all but a handful of our associates."

Xemnas's arms fell downwards.

"For that reason, and that reason alone, I shall grant Sora the illusion of peace until such time his involvement becomes absolutely necessary."

"Hmm... gotta say, that's not much of real plan."

Xigbar wanted to shoot somebody.

For all his grandiose planning and endgame, which led to another Keyblade War and the potential deaths of millions of innocent people, the old coot couldn't *plan*. Xehanort was too confident for his own good, always assuming nothing could go wrong. And if something *did* happen, it wouldn't change anything. But look at him now. Thanks to Terra's unexpected resistance, little miss blue beating the shit out of his new body, Ryuko nearly ending his life with a single attack and splitting himself into a Heartless and Nobody, Xehanort lost most of his memories.

Which left him cleaning up the old coot's mess.

Of course, being transformed into a Nobody hadn't exactly been pleasant. On the contrary, having a Keyblade shoved into his chest and *watching* his heart float away had been damn painful. Almost as bad as Ryuko slicing his face open with her Scissor Blade after surviving getting half her head blown apart. Then again, he'd been

the one who planted the idea for an organization of Nobodies into the amnesic bastard's heart.

But what was a little excruciating pain and permanent loss of identity compared to fulfilling his mission and summoning back his friends?

"Because it seems you're overlooking one *significant* problem. Problem numero uno, if you catch my drift."

Silence was Xemnas's only response, which was perfectly fine.

"Your whole 'hands off' plan..."

Curling two fingers on either hand, Xigbar air-quoted the phrase.

"... depends on Vexen's special little project."

Pain momentarily flared down the years-old scar snaking down the right side of his face, slashing through the remains of his eye, "Yeah, sure, he promised his replica would work. But I'm not one to put all our eggs in one basket. If the poppet doesn't live up to expectations, we'll need a backup Keyblade. But keyslingers aren't exactly common these days. Last time I checked, there were three. Four counting Sora. Which leaves us with one option, not that I like it."

"Do you lack faith?"

The question earned another irritated scoff, "As if! I'm just being realistic. Between the two of us, *I've* fought Ryuko. I know what she can do."

"Then you need only trust me."

Holding out both arms, Xemnas chuckled. Twelve. There were twelve Nobodies in his organization, the last of which joined them only a few months ago. An interesting pair discovered by Xigbar. Most of those painstakingly gathered sought to regain their lost hearts through the power of Kingdom Hearts. Others sought unanswerable questions. And others desired what could never be

obtained, even with the power of Kingdom Hearts. But no matter their intentions, every last one of them were crucial elements difficult to replace.

"It is as you claim - this all depends upon the Replica Program's success."

A somber sigh, one bereft of true emotion yet possessing cold arrogance and superiority, escaped the stoic Nobody's empty chest as he lowered his arms. "If the worst indeed comes to pass, Sora shall be our backup plan. In the meantime, I request you simply remain faithful. Vexen's research *will* bear fruit. That I am certain of."

Thirteen members were required.

To lose even one of their lesser members would be devastating.

"I hold no delusions it will be easy. Or there won't be setbacks. The heart, after all, is a mercurial thing. But if the Replica Program succeeds, our ranks will be complete. The thirteenth and final member shall walk amongst us."

It was quick. An errant perturbation in the flow of time. Yet as he addressed Xigbar, his attention found itself drawn towards the discarded armor and rusted Keyblade perched across the Chamber of Reminiscence.

"One wielding the Keyblade."

Last edited: Jul 4, 2019

Chapter 13.5

Several things. First of all, I would like to point out that Ryuko never, in fact, read Mickey's letter. Second, we're heading away from canon territory here. Not too far. But back to Ryuko for a bit. Don't worry. It'll be fine. Everything will be fine...

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/f/fb/Opening_02_KHBBS.png/1024px-Opening_02_KHBBS.png]

"LIGHT!!!"

Just like every time he used this particular technique, Mickey braced himself. It was risky. And dangerous. But they were out of options. And sometimes one needed to be extra risky to protect their friends. With that thought firmly established in his heart, pearlescent light enveloped his body. The brilliant energy repulsed the surrounding darkness, acting as soft beacon in the never-ending shadows.

And drawing the swarming Heartless straight to him.

Which was the plan.

The creatures of darkness manifested from vortexes and whirlpools throughout the cavern. They flew overhead in twisting streams, thousands upon thousands of Heartless coalesced into a single shadowy mass. Moving at awkward and impossible angles around most of their attacks, vanishing through one portal in the wall only to erupt from a previously invisible corridor underneath their feet. But like all Heartless, they sought to devour every possible trace of light. They were attracted to the Keyblade, incapable of conscious thought beyond devouring hearts.

"GOTCHA!!!"

It felt like Pete slapped him on the back.

"UGH!!!"

Chains of pure light encompassed the Heartless, stopping them from retreating into the shadows *and* binding them into an easily-accessible target. But the constant jostling nearly dislocated his shoulders. They were trapped, but not immobilized. Star Seeker whipped back and forth, pulling him forward along the ground. Dirt piled underneath his sneakers. Yet he held firm. Yanking his Keyblade back, light sparking and fighting against the darkness, he doubled his efforts, momentarily turning the war of attrition in his favor.

"AQUA! NOW!!!"

She *slid* across the ground before Mickey finished shouting.

The radiance from his chains of light reflected against her flushed cheeks. Dark cracks were already manifesting in the technique. Evidence of the darkness's inherent corruption. But it was too late. Far too late for the dwellers of darkness to escape. Illuminated by the warmth as she danced between outcroppings of shadow-covered rocks, pirouetting and dodging around random explosions, bluish-white light colder than a blizzard coalesced around her inherited Keyblade, painting its metallic teeth the purest expression of sapphire. As her blue hair whipped back and forth in the accompanying wind, buffeted by lowering temperatures and numbness, Aqua drew upon the power within her heart. A light nurtured and cherished despite everything.

Time slowed to an agonizing crawl as she slid underneath the ensnared Heartless.

Entangled within Mickey's chains of light, the dwellers of darkness could only struggle.

Yet she didn't aim at *them*.

"HA!!!"

A quick thrust penetrated the outer layers, Master's Defender sinking through countless Heartless before reaching the shadows guarding the innermost darkness. Almost immediately her breath condensed as pale clouds of crystallizing frost. The temperature dropped several dozen degrees. Droplets of drying blood instantaneously froze against her bare flesh. But through narrowed eyes, one corner of her mouth pulled into a grimacing wince, Aqua pierced even further into the struggling Heartless.

"BLIZZAJA!!!"

The entire swarm *instantly* flash-froze.

Writhing limbs numbering in the thousands immediately petrified into translucent ice. Yellow and ruby eyes eternally stared at her tantalizing heart, unblinking from the explosion of elemental magic. The demonic tower resembled a rose garden after the autumn's first frost, an artesian display of ice-covered thorns and frozen petals. Beautiful yet dangerous. And the devastation wasn't limited to the dwellers of darkness. Blizzaja was dangerous for a reason. Because beyond the Heartless trapped in their last death throes and actions, streams of ice covered the darkened cavern, waves upon waves spreading throughout the shadows like a frozen ocean.

"It's over."

She didn't need to say anything else.

CRACK!!!

It started slowly. But within moments, the creatures shattered, raining shards of ice and darkness throughout the whispering void.

"Aqua!"

Rushing across the cavern, pelted by ice as Aqua's sculpture, melted, Mickey took a moment to catch his breath, "Are you alright?"

Shoulders rising and falling as exhaustion latched itself onto her weary heart, Keyblade vanishing into light, Aqua nodded "Yeah. I'm fine."

"Gosh, I never thought I'd find ya in the Realm of Darkness."

Without the Heartless pestering them, popping out of nowhere left and right, always sneaking through the shadows until they lowered their guard, he finally relaxed. They were still out there. But for the moment, he allowed Star Seeker to disintegrate into motes of pearlescent light, "Geez, talk about a surprise! So, um, how'd ya end up in a place like this?"

Aqua's mind drifted aimlessly through the shadows.

Memories and nightmares clung to her heart as the pressure of countless weeks or months... or even years... stumbling through the darkness, coming across fragments of worlds, some she recognized and many she didn't, took their toll. Guilt didn't simply disappear. In this awful and terrible place, her many failures were materialized. Ryuko. Ven. Terra. And Master Eraqus. The darkness mocked her past. It played with her emotions, steadily unraveling the fraying threads of sanity until nothing remained but despair and sorrow.

["Have you seen Terra or Ven?"](#)

Mickey's smile vanished, "No. Just you."

"Oh..."

Her gaze fell towards the ground between her feet, black and blue and purple mixing together into some strange combination of colors, "And Ryuko?"

"She's doing just fine!"

Those four words kickstarted her heart. For a long and agonizing moment, she lost the ability to speak. Her thoughts were jumbled

messes. Her tongue drier than cotton. She fervently tried talking, yet only strained choking noises passed between her trembling lips.

"I -"

Thoughts of diverging and conflicting thoughts struggled to escape. The hastening *thump-thump* of her heart made every second feel like an eternity. Rubbing her thumb against her other fingers, knuckles bleeding pinkish-white from the pressure clenching them into a fist, she swallowed the lump in the back of her throat. Dulled eyes widened, light shimmering within the listless depths, "Ryuko's alright?"

"She woke up about a month after you... well, disappeared."

Mickey knew what to say. He knew exactly what to tell Aqua. He simply didn't know where to start, "Her heart was damaged. But not too much. I don't know what Ardyn Lucis Caelum hoped to accomplish, but it didn't seem to have worked."

"Thank goodness."

A sigh escaped her lips as they quirked into the slightest semblance of a smile, "Forgive me, Mickey. I didn't... I shouldn't have... I'm sorry. It's just - the darkness in this place. If you're not careful, it whispers into your heart."

"Don't worry about it."

He didn't know why Aqua was apologizing when she didn't do anything wrong, "Ya know, Ryuko never stopped looking for you and Terra and Ven. She always believed you were out there somewhere."

It was a painful secret.

One he wasn't too willing to share with Aqua. At least, not until they escaped the Realm of Darkness.

When that man bearing Xehanort's name yet resembling Terra walked into Ansem the Wise's study, he'd nearly leapt out of his chair. It had to be a coincidence. There was no way it could be true. But his heart was his guiding key. And after Ansem ordered Xehanort to stop discussing doors and hearts and memories, all doubts vanished. Not only had the villainous Keyblade Master survived confronting Ryuko and Terra, he'd done something truly awful to one of his best friends. But by the time he warned Ansem and told Ryuko, it was too late.

Not only had Ansem the Wise vanished, Xehanort was nowhere to be found.

And Hollow Bastion was overrun by countless Heartless.

"Hey, how come you're in a place like this? What happened?"

Aqua's gaze drifted towards the Wayfinder in her fingers, "It started after we parted ways."

Distracted by ancient memories, she traced patterns across the cerulean surface, feeling each and every contour and ridge, the places where glue had run long and where she almost needed to start over from scratch when one of the pieces briefly shifted out of position, "I needed to take Ven somewhere safe. A place he could rest until his heart returned..."

"The Land of Departure, right?"

An astonished hitch hissed between her slightly parted lips, "Yes, but how -"

"It was one of the first places we looked."

Shaking his head, Mickey somberly continued, "Only, when I got there, everything was different. Confusing. Master Beatrix explained that the stewards... those protecting the Land of Departure... can alter the world if anything threatened the delicate balance between

light and darkness. Ensuring nobody but the steward could find their way around. And considering you have Master Eraqus's old Keyblade, not to mention you seem awfully surprised, you must've left Ven somewhere inside the castle!"

"Yeah..."

Aqua trailed off when painful memories of Xehanort using Terra's heart to locate Ven reared their ugly heads.

"Once Ven was safe, I went after Terra. Only something was wrong. Xehanort, I don't know how, but he was controlling Terra. I tried saving him. But it was too late. I was too late."

Memories, old and new, simmered within her heart. She remembered every little detail with painful clarity. Terra struggling against Xehanort's control. That strange Heartless monster emerging from Terra's shadow. Chains of darkness latching around her ankles and wrists, digging hard enough into her skin to leave droplets of blood across the courtyard. Her voice harsh and raspy as she begged Terra to resist Xehanort. Blood staining her corset when Terra regained control for a fraction of a second, resisting Xehanort long enough to throw his Keyblade off-track.

Then nothing but eternal darkness and never-ending sorrow.

"Xehanort was about to fall into darkness. And with him, any chance of saving Terra would vanish. So, I had one choice."

Hugging herself, Aqua swallowed years worthy of agonizing guilt, "I stayed behind, here in the darkness, to give Terra another chance. But I guess it wasn't enough. In the end, I only made everything worse."

Mickey's ears drooped, "I... I didn't know."

"It's fine."

Another question faltered on the tip of her tongue as Terra's warning about Xehanort and worlds falling whispered into her ears, "Mickey, why are you here? Has something happened in the Realm of Light?"

"Well, it's the Heartless!"

Frustration clung to Mickey's heart. Not at the Heartless. Or anyone else. But himself for lacking the strength to protect those he cherished, "They've been attacking worlds and taking their hearts! And worlds without hearts disappeared, leaving behind pain and suffering. Just like what happened to Ryuko's world. We've been doing our best. But there are just too many worlds to protect. If something's not done soon, the Heartless will overrun the entire universe!"

His hand briefly clenched into a fist.

"That's why I'm here!"

Staring at the ground between his shoes, Mickey's brow furrowed beneath the burden of his self-imposed mission, "Ya see, there's a very special door connecting the realms of light and darkness. A Door to Darkness. It's the main reason so many Heartless are attacking the worlds. But if we can somehow lock this door from both sides, we can protect the remaining worlds!"

Every word bolstered his resolve, drawing strength from the light within his heart.

"The Heartless would still exist. But there wouldn't be so many of them!"

Determination flashed within the Keyblade Master's eyes as he turned around, staring off into the darkness, "However, to truly close the door once and for all, I'll need a certain key from this side. A key of darkness. Only, it's not so easy getting into this terrible place. Usually ya need to wait until a world's about to fall into darkness than an entrance appears deep in the Realm Between. But I couldn't

stand around and watch a world suffer. Not if I could do something about it. I... I needed help."

A tense silence nearly stifled their collective light before he took a deep breath.

"So, I decided to ask the one person capable of traveling between the realms of light and darkness for help. Well, the only guy I knew who wasn't evil or nefarious. "

In the middle of his explanation, Mickey noticed Aqua staring at her Wayfinder, a distant look in her eyes. And without thinking, he reached out, holding her hand and gently steadying her heart.

"And when I got here, I felt a warm, familiar light. I followed it through the darkness... straight to you."

"The charm..."

Gazing at the cherished keepsake, a lucky charm from the last night they were together, Aqua felt the darkness dissipate from her thoughts. Everything looked clearer. The surrounding shadows retreated. And in their sudden absence, familiar warmth and light gently caressed her aching heart, "Even while I stumbled through the darkness, Terra and Ven brought us together. But the worlds are still in trouble. Terra... did he make it back? Is he safe?"

"It's... complicated."

She wanted to ask more, to understand what Mickey really meant by those depressing words, yet his despondence gave her pause.

"I see..."

Her voice was little more than a whisper as for the longest of moments, darkness oozing from every corner of the realm, she stared at the Wayfinder, "... then Terra's still fighting. His light hasn't vanished."

A somber smile pulled upon the corners of her mouth. And she found herself laughing not out of mirth or happiness, but relief.

"He'll beat the darkness."

She pressed the Wayfinder against her heart, "He'll overcome Xehanort. I just know he will."

"That's right!"

Mickey nodded, "Even if it contains darkness, Terra's heart is strong! We just have to believe in him! But before we do anything, we need to find that key! Once the Door to Darkness is locked good and tight, we can head home together!"

"Home..."

Staring one final time at the Wayfinder before tucking the memento into her shirt next to the picture of Ryuko and Satsuki and their friend, Aqua frowned, "Does that mean you know the way out?"

"Well, um, that all depends."

An eyebrow quirked at Mickey's bashful evasion, "On what?"

"On how long Ryuko needs to convince Gilgamesh to open another door to this place."

He had complete faith in Ryuko. After all, they were friends. And he'd written detailed instructions in his letter. Two keys. One in the light and the other in the darkness. Both needed to close the door. It should have been enough for Ryuko to piece everything together. She'd known he'd been searching for the Door to Darkness since the Heartless started growing too numerous to fight. If anyone could realize he intended on heading into the Realm of Darkness, and that the easiest way of doing so involved Gilgamesh, it would be Ryuko.

All she needed to do was convince Gilgamesh to pull him, and now Aqua, out of the darkness once the door was closed.

Well, maybe 'convince' was a poor choice of word.

"Sure, maybe his heart's not always in the right place."

Three nos. Then a maybe. Then another maybe. Followed by a hesitant and long-winded yes before one final, drawling warning about the dangers lurking within the shadows. In the end, he needed to promise Gilgamesh something he wanted - one of the swords Captain Steiner confiscated after Ardyn Lucis Caelum's attack on Lindblum.

"But Ryuko's too stubborn to take 'no' for an answer. I'm certain she'll convince Gilgamesh to help... one way or another."

Aqua slowly found herself smiling.

"Yeah, she probably will."

They shared a chuckle. A brief moment of levity. But upon looking around, Mickey came to a realization. He vastly underestimated out difficult finding the key would be. The darkness didn't take kindly to his presence. It was just like Gilgamesh warned - the Realm of Darkness liked playing tricked on the unprepared heart.

"Alright, I don't know how long until Ryuko forces the guy into coming after us, so there's no point standing around!"

Now that he had a chance to gather his thoughts, he noticed they were inside some sort of cavern. A place different from the shattered islands, oceans of darkness and never-ending shadows after stepping through Gilgamesh's gateway. But beneath the surface everything was the same. Heartless. Darkness. Negative emotions. And several things too heinous to imagine. It was faint. Across dozens upon dozens of darkened horizons. But there it was. A darkness slumbering in the shadows. A presence he hadn't seen since that awful afternoon.

"The sooner we lock the door, the faster we can leave this -"

Existence abruptly *shook*.

The Realm of Darkness *trembled*.

And Mickey suddenly found himself falling.

"Whoa!"

As soon as the ground crumbled and shattered underneath their feet, breaking apart and falling into the abyssal darkness, he leapt into action. Hopping from one collapsing platform to another, sometimes at awkward angles, he sprinted towards the nearest exit. A pinprick of light flickering in the nearest distance. Dodging around falling stalagmites and shattering boulders covered in glowing cracks, Star Seeker deflecting anything coming too close for comfort, he crouched upon reaching relative stability.

"What's going on?"

Standing on the cliff overlooking the new chasm, a pit of darkness stretching across the cavern to the horizon, he shivered as goosebumps trickled down his spine, "Is it the Heartless?"

"I don't know."

With a soft huff as she landed next to the king, Master's Defender firmly in hand, Aqua's eyes widened at the unfolding devastation, "I've never seen something like - "

A tidal wave of pure, unrelenting darkness stole the breath from her lungs.

Thousands upon thousands of Heartless, more than she could count, exploded from the newly-formed chasm. Born from the darkness itself, the creatures erupted inches away from her face. Nauseating yellow and red eyes merged into an ominous orange blur. It was impossible separating one dweller of darkness from another. But something was wrong. Instead of attacking them, the

never-ending stream of Heartless, enough to overwhelm the worlds and most of the Realm of Light, ignored them.

"What?"

As the creatures kept *coming*, rushing upwards through the cavern's ceiling into the purple darkness lurking beyond, Aqua involuntarily stepped backwards, "What are they doing?"

"Ya got me..."

Mickey was baffled. He'd never seen Heartless flat-out ignore him. Not once. The Heartless were attracted to the Keyblade. As long as he had the Keyblade, and perhaps even if gave it up, they would still come after him. But as more and more Heartless, the creatures lacking the strange symbol worn by most of the Heartless attacking the worlds, exploded out of the swirling abyss, not a single one diverting from their course, his frown deepened, "Heartless are attracted to the Keyblade! The only reason they might ignore us is if..."

"If what?"

"... if, well, another, far more powerful heart appeared. One containing an awful lot of light."

"Light?"

Something about that word sparked panic within Aqua's heart.

And then she felt *her*.

"Ryuko!"

Mickey didn't trust his eyes or ears in a place like this. But Aqua was right. On the horizon, appearing as a crimson flicker, he felt Ryuko's heart. Her light and darkness. And that made everything worse. A lot worse. Because her heart was acting like a beacon, drawing every Heartless within in the Realm of Darkness straight to her location.

But the question lurking on his mind, causing knots to form in the pit of his stomach, was *why* her heart felt so overwhelming strong.

"I think so..."

Rubbing his chin, he tried concealing his nervousness, "But something's wrong!"

"Wrong?"

"Yeah," he nodded to Aqua, never looking away from Ryuko, "If everything went as planned, Gilgamesh should've been the only one to step foot in this place. But Ryuko's here, which can only mean one thing - something awful happened in the Realm of Light!"

Aqua's heart skipped a beat.

But before she could take so much as a single step, a hand latched around her wrist.

"Hold on, Aqua!"

He flinched at the desperation in Aqua's eyes. A deep-seated pain that nearly caused him to let go. But holding steady, Mickey swallowed the lump in his throat, "I want to help Ryuko as much as you do! But she's strong! Stronger than almost everyone I know! She can hold her own against some Heartless! We just gotta believe in her! Not to mention she's probably here with Gilgamesh. If things prove too much for them, they can always escape back to the Realm of Light!"

"I -"

She wanted to argue.

But no matter how much her heart screamed otherwise, Mickey was right.

"... okay."

Her attention wandered towards the Heartless swarming overhead. Countless creatures of darkness stemming from dozens of shattered worlds. Holding tighter onto Master Eraqus's Keyblade, Aqua allowed a soft sigh to escape her lips. Despite wanting nothing more than to help Ryuko, she turned around, staring into the waiting darkness.

"Let's find that key."

Chapter 13.6

*I'd like to point out that Nui Harime *never* curses. Not once. So when she does curse, in her thoughts or otherwise, you know how she must *really* feel.*

Noxious dust choked the musty air.

Upon that hazy mirage, tempted by fading shadows of the past, lingering darkness clung to the once somber tribute to uncountable numbers of Keyblade wielders. The rusted blades previously stabbed into the parched soil lay strewn about the desolate wasteland. Craters, massive and easily overlooked, crisscrossed the badlands.

"..."

Laying in the middle of one such crater, blood gushing into the arid ground from too many wounds and injuries to possibly count, Nui Harime considered every seemingly unnecessary detail with deliberating befitting an artiste.

As blood dribbled from the corners of her lips, staining voluminous blonde hair already coated in dirt, grime and other disgusting things, she blinked. Or tried to blink. Which somewhat worked. But resting her head against the ground, Nui pondered the situation. That fun, yet slightly depressing, lingering remnant of Ryuko's dear old friend didn't know the meaning of holding back. Her adorable roseate coat, roses and dahlia's embroidered into the stitched, lay tattered, barely concealing her most precious areas from unwanted eyes. Everything below her right knee, as well as most of her left leg, was gone. And not just *gone*, but completely and utterly vaporized.

Her entire right arm was missing for the second time since arriving on this boring wasteland, explaining why she couldn't feel her fingers.

Rolling her head slightly to the left, which was a little troublesome since most of it had been blown to smithereens, totally destroying her depth perception in the process, Nui noticed her Keyblade against the perpetually setting sun. Seamstress was right where she left it, stabbed into a boulder nearly the same size as that six-armed freak. For an exceptionally long moment, Nui's remaining eye stared at the purplish-pink metal shimmering in the twilight, scattering various oranges and yellows and reds and purples across her bloodied face.

"... huh..."

Ignoring the broken vertebrae in her neck, she huffed, blowing strands of bloodied hair off her lips. Gosh, with her hair touching the dirty ground, messing and unkempt, not a bottle of conditioner in sight, she looked terrible. Bruises, burns, scraps and cuts covered whatever flesh hadn't been beaten or vaporized. A pool of blood larger than a queen-sized mattress coated her dismembered body. The left side of head was missing, completely ruining her depth perception and surfacing unpleasant memories. Because, as was her luck, the armored figure *had* to destroy her left eye, not the right.

She looked like that one human who refused Ragyo's generous offer to sell everything he'd spent decades building from scratch to the Kiryuin Conglomerate.

"Boy..."

It had taken Hououmaru's undersecretary the better part of an afternoon cleaning up that delightfully-artistic masterpiece.

"... for nothing but memories, he was ~pretty~ strong."

Her mouth moved. Words escaped her cracked lips. But since her windpipe had been crushed between armored fingers right before the lingering fragment slammed her dismembered body into the ground, which had been quite surprising, all that emerged were wet gurgles.

"And had ~a lot~ of anger issues."

Ignorant of how much pain she should be experiencing, blood dribbled from the corners of Nui's mouth, pooling against the underside of her chin before falling to the ground.

"It sure was lucky I was around to help him work through his problems."

A series of wracking coughs unmistakable as anything other than laughter accompanied a winning smile.

"But gosh..."

Even butchered to the point she resembled Ryuko after her sister painfully tore off Junketsu, she wasn't remotely close to drawing her last breath. Not now. And not ever, "... couldn't he have taken it easy on little old me?"

She found herself smiling, an expression made all the more nightmarish thanks to the missing flesh exposing the inside of her mouth.

At times like these, drowning in her own blood and bodily fluids, Nui appreciated Ryuko being so tight-lipped about Life Fibers.

Unlike her darling sister, who believed she was human ~so much~ it was downright pathetic, she didn't pretend being something she wasn't. She wasn't human. She had no intention on lowering herself to the same level as pigs in human clothing. Or those empty bodies walking around without hearts. Or even those precocious Heartless. Doing something like that would be utterly demeaning. Ryuko might be strong, stronger than almost everyone in the Realm of Light, but despite looking like death warmed over, she felt *nothing*. Neither pain nor discomfort.

Because she was ~still~ the Grand Couturier.

No matter what might happen between them, even if they argued again and again and again, she and Ryuko had no one other than themselves for company.

"Hmm..."

Thanks to the arid wind blowing through the graveyard, her cracked lips felt slightly drier, "I wonder how the old coot stole his body?"

She paused.

Ryuko's influence ~truly~ was infectious.

"Ça n'a pas vraiment d'importance."

It seemed stupid repeating herself, but so what? She was a free spirit. An artiste. Life was meant to be enjoyed to the fullest. As the former Grand Couturier of Revocs, beholden only to her own mercurial whims, she didn't care about anyone's thoughts or feelings or personal opinions. She went wherever she wanted. She saw whoever she wanted. She did *anything* she wanted. Other than Ryuko and a handful of humans, maybe Satsuki on a good day, who could possibly stop her? Nobody, that's who. Not even those pathetic nobodies.

Of course, there were some people, the kind of humans who were all self-righteous and arrogant, who probably found the truth utterly repulsive.

But good for them! The more the merrier! Because driving the point deep into their hearts - metaphorically and physically - was always fun and exciting!

"Well..."

Purplish-crimson energy erupted from her visceral wounds, shadowed light and burning darkness merging into a monstrous cacophony, "... I suppose it's time to get up."

Before the words left her bloodied lips, the lower half of her body regenerated. Life Fibers traveled at speeds approaching several meters per second until her toenails, each painted the same adorable shade of violet, vanished within a pair of snug pink boots. Blood, dried or otherwise splattered across the crater, disappeared as she individually wiggled the fingers on her right hand.

Everything doubled in color, depth and intensity when the left side of her head reconstructed itself.

The wounds blemishing her body sewed themselves shut.

"But I wonder..."

Wind whistled between boulders as Seamstress teleported across the graveyard of empty tombs into her eager fingers.

"... how someone as dumb as him almost became a Keyblade Master?"

An award-winning smile burned her cheeks.

"That silly old trick would ~never~ have worked against Ryuko!"

Amusement shimmered within the sociopathic depths of her eyes, which were so very much like Ryuko's. She didn't care for Terra. Not in the slightest. The guy might've been Ryuko's friend. But that was Ryuko. And she *wasn't* Ryuko. She didn't care about humans. She hardly cared about Satsuki even when her precocious sister was still pretending to be completely loyal to Ragyo and Life Fibers. All that mattered was what *she* wanted. Her passions and hobbies. It was the reason she started humming a familiar, yet slightly outdated popular song while skipping over out of the cavity in the ground formed by that lingering annoying pile-driving her through solid rock with the blunt edge of his Keyblade.

"Hmm..."

And why she clasped Seamstress against the small of her back.

"... I really do come up with my best work under pressure."

Gravity momentarily surrendered influence over her existence as she reached the crater's edge. Her voluminous blonde hair softly bounced with every playful skip, moving as a single mass while cascading down her back. Lightly propelling herself forward one step at a time across the wasteland, nary a sound competing with the Keyblade Graveyard's silence other than her humming, Nui's lips quirked upwards.

"Especially when humans do most of the work for me."

She would never understand why humans grew upset when their fellow humans, loved ones or parents or whatever, died. It seemed ridiculous. She hadn't cared when Ragyo ordered her to sacrifice herself to the Original Life Fiber. And she wouldn't have shed any tears if killing Ragyo meant the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet's success. That was simply the way the world worked. And why she plucked upon Terra's self-doubts until he'd exploded into an eruption of fury, hatred and oh-so-much-anger. But unlike the time she confessed to Ryuko about murdering her dear old daddy, fighting the guy's fragmented memories and emotions hadn't been out of revenge. Or retribution for his pathetic father's stupidity.

Simply for good, old-fashioned fun and excitement!

But despite enjoying playing around, there were other things she needed to do.

Far more important things.

And she *was* a grown woman.

Which brought everything full-circle to Ryuko refusing to tell anybody, not even her master, more than the bare essentials about Life Fibers.

Because unlike her sister, she didn't *pretend* to be anything other than herself.

And that made all the difference.

The *instant* he transformed his Keyblade into an overcompensating cannon with enough firepower to blast a hole through Lindblum's Grand Castle, she 'accidentally' slipped on some rubble. And when that amazing explosion of light and energy weaker than Ryuko's Kisaragi Nova exploded in her face, she promptly stopped her regeneration. All it took was a mental 'snap' of her fingers. Nothing more. It was that simple. And perfectly safe. It wasn't dangerous. Or anything remotely close to getting sliced by a pair of Scissor Blades. Or a worthless pig in human clothing gouging out your eye when he should have stayed on the floor and kept his *goddamn* mouth shut.

Faking excruciating pain isn't difficult. She had loads of practices, after all.

THUNK!!!

Seamstress sunk into the soft dirt, sending clouds of dust caressing her pink boots.

"My, my, my..."

The word rolled upon her tongue.

"... what to do... what to do..."

All that playing with that presumptuous fragment of Ryuko's friend gave her time to mull things over. And now that she was once more alone, able to think without concerning herself with strange suits of armor appearing out of hazy mirages, Nui leaned forward onto Seamstress, one leg curled backwards until her heel almost touched her thigh.

"So many options... so little time..."

As she puffed out her cheeks, Nui pondered that all-important question. What *should* she do? There was always Sora. Despite being no closer to understanding how an average brat with average strength and slightly above average charisma stumbled across a Keyblade when she *knew*, beyond a shred of a doubt, Ryuko ~never~ allowed anyone, not even Satsuki on a good day, touch Threadcutter, she wasn't too upset. There was almost next time. Or the hands-on approach where she discards subtlety to the wayside and plucks the answers from Sora's vulnerable mind via well-stitched Marionette Threads.

It wouldn't be quite the same as reading his heart like an open book.

But it was the next-best thing!

Of course, going the distance in search of the truth would probably lead Ryuko, Satsuki and their friends straight to her doorstep, which went against the whole point of staying under the radar.

That only left Xehanort.

She and Ryuko might have their personal disagreements about who killed whose father. But that was literally an entirely lifetime ago. The past was the past. There was no point even thinking about it. What's done was done. Thinking about the past simply wasted valuable time better spent doing other stuff. And therein lied the issue. And why her fingers tightened around Seamstress despite her sunny smile never faltering. Just because they never got along, which was true for most siblings, didn't mean she wouldn't tear that arthritic old coot apart one limb at a limb.

It didn't even matter Xehanort was inside Terra's body.

"I guess there's only one thing I ~can~ do."

A giggle passed between her lips. Sometimes she really appreciated Ryuko's influence over her heart. Both the good and the bad. After all, if Ryuko hadn't escaped the destruction of their world, she never

would have returned. And a universe without a Grand Couturier would be simply too boring and dull to possibly exist!

"Well, no point dilly-dallying!"

Curling her fingers around Seamstress, she effortlessly yanked the Keyblade out of the ground. Sora or Xehanort. Both were good options. But she needed to choose. And so, propping the Keyblade oh-so-similar to Ryuko's on her shoulder, she reached out and *touched* the darkness always lurking around the corner.

It sounded super cliché.

But Ryuko's master was absolutely right.

Darkness was a vital, necessary component of her heart. The yin to her yang. She couldn't ignore it. Or suppress it. Or hope if she pretended it didn't exist, it would go away. Just like she couldn't pretend not having the best fashion sense throughout Realm of Light. One far superior to that stupid moogles. Ryuko was the sense. They were two peas in a pod. Despite her sister's childish prostrations, they both accepted the darkness as part of themselves. Yet unlike those humans playing would-be conqueror with the Heartless, who were so eager to devour their hearts the shadows couldn't ~touch~ *their* hearts.

Because Life Fibers were simply different.

No more and no less.

"Hmm... hmm... hmm-hmm-hmm..."

Placing one foot in front of the other, she callously approached the swirling darkness, "Can't stand around doing nothin' all day! A woman's gotta..."

Nui's breath briefly hitched.

And then she smiled.

"You truly are a bad influence."

There were moments she appreciated Ryuko's influence. And there were also times she didn't. But despite feeling like Ryuko took a sledgehammer to her heart, she wasn't the least bit annoyed. Because these were her sister's true emotions! The feelings Ryuko buried beneath that thin veneer of humanity. Worry. Concern. Trepidation. Annoyance. And countless others. The powerful emotions resonated between their synchronized hearts. Her eyes widened as Ryuko's heart, accidentally or not, briefly replaced her cute vernacular with vulgar and crude contractions.

It was so intense she could feel her Life Fibers positively tingling!

"Good luck, Ryuko!"

Pressing a finger against her lips, Nui stepped into the awaiting darkness.

"Because where you're going, you're going to need it!"

Chapter 14.1

Boy, the Kill la Kill game had some really interesting details and spoilers, didn't it? I'm honestly tempted to figure out how they work in my story.

[img:

https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/finalfantasy/images/c/c1/Lindblum_Theater_District_FF9_Color_Art.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20120923225858]

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 14 - Kickstart My Heart

The whole 'break into Ryuko's house and steal the scissor sword' wasn't going as planned.

"C'mon!"

And by 'not going as planned,' he meant disastrously.

"Where is it!?"

Effortlessly tossing the ugly couch across the living room, Pete's head whipped back and forth. Maybe the stupid scissor fell on the ground and Ryuko kicked it underneath the couch at some point. But he saw nothing but nothing - just rotten lemon rinds, lint, dust and a copy of last August's subscription of 'Weapons Monthly'.

"That darn scissor to be around here somewhere!"

He wasn't one to complain, but for a broad, Ryuko wasn't exactly into normal girly things. She didn't have those moogles every snotty nosed brat carried under their arms or pink-colored whatchamacallits. The only stuff of any real interest, which he might take for the heck of it, was a fancy guitar in the corner next to an

amp and expensive-looking stereo with a bunch of tangled cables, a silver case with a bunch of stickers plastered across it, several posters with bands he'd never heard of, actions figures on shelves and books.

Lots and lots of books.

But no scissors.

"C'mon, Pete, use yer noggin'!"

There had to be something he was missing. But what? He'd already combed every inch of the living room and kitchen, helped himself to a quick snack, checked the closets for hidden rooms. Where else could he possibly -

"Huh?"

Next to the nook overlooking the kitchen, between the bottles of wine collecting dust and fruit baskets, tacked to the wall, was a picture. And not just any old picture, but an obnoxious caricature of his handsome likeness. An exaggerated mockery with buck teeth, a pot belly, insulting speech bubbles and stink lines wafting towards the ceiling. A hand-drawn picture with several pens, pencils, knives and what looked like a miniature copy of Ryuko's Keyblade stabbed through various portions of his anatomy.

Including one that made him involuntarily squeeze his legs together.

"Humph!"

Furiously tearing the crude representation off the wall, Pete ripped it into bits and pieces before throwing the confetti over his shoulder. Who did Ryuko think she was making fun of someone's natural characteristics? The broad had some nerve! If only she was here! Oh, if Ryuko were around he'd... uh... he'd probably hightail it off-world, hoping she was too busy saving people to properly hunt him down.

"Alright, back to business!"

Metallic groans and assorted noises filled the room as he turned around, floorboards squeaking beneath his impressive girth, "Gotta find that scissor!"

The Heartless might be running amok through the streets, stealing any hearts they could snatch while keeping guards and other goody two-shoes real busy-like, but he couldn't afford wasting any more time. Because Maleficent was always right, even when things didn't necessarily go their way. Or some annoying hero popped out of the shadows to ruin their good news. Or a terrifying broad punched her way through a brick wall. If she said he had ten minutes before Beatrix saved the day like the Keyblade Master she was, then he had less than ten minutes to find the scissors and skedaddle. To make like a tree and leave. To escape while the getting's good.

Because no way, not even if Maleficent offered him a billion gil, would he stick around when that crazy broad began mowing through their Heartless like nobody's business.

"Hmm..."

Scratching his chin for the fifth, or maybe sixth, time since kicking down Ryuko's front door, Pete adjusted the off-color plum and awkward-fitting armor. It wasn't every day he came across the perfect pasty. A lazy slob sleeping on the job. It had been a piece of cake convincing the moron to run into the alley after some Heartless. But a few punches to the back of the guard's head provided the perfect disguise for sneaking around Lindblum. But no matter how much the guard's sturdiness resembled his own, the armor was too tight. His helmet reeked of cheese. His back was itchy. There was something wet inside his boots. His gloves felt like they'd been dropped in a swamp. And there were crumbs inside his pockets.

Not to mention the *clanking*.

But nobody, and he meant nobody, would second-guess an ordinary guard.

Especially when Heartless were running amok through the streets.

"Let's see..."

Folding his arms one over the other, Pete didn't blink when an explosion flashed through the window, "I've searched just about everywhere. But I'm still missin' something."

It was on the tip of his tongue.

He could almost *taste* the answer.

"Wait a darn sec..."

He'd been going about the whole thing the wrong way. Ryuko might be a 'punch first and ask questions later' type of broad, but she wasn't stupid. She had street smarts! She wasn't one of those nerdy book-types always prattling about magic or annoying long-term plans. If he was Ryuko, not that he could ever imagine himself looking so hideous with those dyed bangs and weird eyes, he wouldn't leave the scissors out in the open for any old burglar, hoodlum or two-bit thug to find. He'd hide it someplace real safe and secure. A place nobody in their right minds would search.

"Heh, Pete, you're a genius!"

Sliding across the wooden floors, barreling into the wall and knocking several pictures onto the ground, Pete huffed and puffed as he sprinted up the steps. The floor creaked beneath his weight. Through the windows, columns of smoke rose across Lindblum. Heartless swarmed outside, fighting airships and gummi ships and those obnoxious Burmecian rats capable of leaping buildings in a single bound. But as he reached his one and only goal, sweat dripping down his face and heart beating a mile a minute, his smile widened.

"Heh, heh, heh!"

One by one, sometimes several at a time, his fingers twitched.

"Come to Petey!"

As he grabbed the doorknob, all but certain of his eventual triumph, Pete laughed. For once, everything was turning out perfect. No Keyblade Masters ruining his day. Ryuko nowhere in sight. Heartless keeping would-be heroes busy. He just needed to open the door, grab the scissor sword and skedaddle back to Hollow Bastion before anyone even knew he -

"Huh?"

His train of thought crashed and burned when the door didn't budge.

"What the -?"

Another hard yank proved it wasn't his imagination. But that was impossible! The door wasn't even *locked*! Besides, it was only wood and metal hinges. Nothing his unbridled strength couldn't break down! All he needed to do was throw his weight at the perfect angle.

BANG!!!

Even after taking several steps in the opposite direction, huffing angrily and running full-tilt against the door, it didn't break. Leaving him annoyed, irritated, slightly tired and nursing a bruised shoulder.

"C'mon!"

Propping one foot against the wall, Pete gnashed his teeth and *pulled* the doorknob with both hands.

"Open! You! Stupid! Door!"

Sweat dripped down his face. Something wasn't right. No door in the universe should be this stubborn. Which meant magic was involved.

Or the Keyblade. Now that he thought about it, the boat-boy King had demonstrated his fancy Keyblade back in the day. Before the Queen marooned him on that floating rock in the darkness. Not to mention those other nimrods with personal problems and deep-seated emotional issues. But if the Keyblade could open or close any lock in all the worlds, breaking down the door would be downright impossible.

"Alright!"

Pushing down his helmet and hiking up his pants, Pete punched one hand against the other, "No more mister nice -"

"HHHHEEEELLLLLLOOOOO!!!!!!!"

He froze at the unexpected, yet weirdly upbeat, voice coming from just outside. A stranger? Here? Now? During a Heartless attack? That was suspicious. Almost peculiar-like. Thinking about the possibility of someone, even if they were nothing but another random idiot who couldn't mind their own business, accidentally stumbling across his devious intents caused his mind to whirl around and around in circles. He didn't have time for this! He needed to find those fancy scissors and skedaddle before Beatrix showed up or else Maleficent would be furious.

"ANYBODY HOME!?"

He didn't have time for this! He needed to find those fancy scissors or else Maleficent would be furious.

"OH MY GOSH!!!!"

A dollop of sweat unrelated to the sweltering armor snaked down his cheek when the unwanted pest walked through the front door.

"RYUKO'S BEEN BURGLED!!!!"

It was... strange. For him. At least, stranger than normal. It could've been panic. Or knowing that crazy-strong Keyblade Master would be arriving any minute. But as the annoying pest darted back and forth underneath his feet, speaking a mile a minute about calling the guards and everyone she knew, a dastardly idea popped into his noggin. A brilliant and cunning plan worthy of the right-hand man to the strongest, most powerful sorceress in the entire universe! One that might just work.

"Heh... heh... heh... show time!"

Grinning from ear to ear, Pete straightened his shoulders, stiffened his back, cleared his throat and cracked his knuckles. To the common folk, he looked picture-perfect. An ordinary guard investigating a potential burglary. Nothing too special. Or outright suspicious.

"HALT, VILE SCUM!!!"

One hand pressed against the helmet bouncing atop his head while the other drew the slightly-rusted broadsword from his belt as he raced downstairs. Not a chance would he allow an average, run-of-the-mill goon ruin everything. And once he scared them away like the cowards they were, he could go back to breaking into Ryuko's room and stealing her scissor swords!

"IN THE NAME OF THE KING I HEREBY PLACE YOU UNDER ARREST!!!"

Mako didn't so much as blink when the strange guard smelling of old cheese and half-eaten baloney sandwiches raced into the living room like he was being chased by a flock of wild chocobos. Even when he brandished his sword back and forth... back and forth... like shish kabobs from their last barbecue, she whistled, "Huh?"

"Uh..."

"What?"

"Who... uh..."

"Me?"

"Wha..."

Looking at her watch, then at the guard, then back at her watch, then back at the sweating guard, Mako broke the infinite loop of awkward exchanges and greetings by interjecting a random question, "Oh, were you investigating the scene of the crime, mister guard?"

"Uh..."

A strange noise whistled between Pete's teeth. Then he remembered he was wearing a Lindblum Guard's uniform. His perfect disguise. The whole reason he raced downstairs while blustering about arresting the two-bit, second-rate thugs daring to ruin everything.

"Err... yes! That's right! Good job, random citizen!"

Sheathing his broadsword, which took three attempts since the weapon wouldn't fit in its scabbard, he coughed into his hand, "With those nasty Heartless runnin' amok through our fair town, Captain Basch wanted ta make sure nobody tried robbin' Master Ryuko's place on account of her bein' famous. And wouldn't you know it? Just before I got here, I saw this group of dastardly villains - the Beagle Boys running in the opposite direction!"

"The Bagel Boys?"

Suddenly feeling hungry for breakfast even though it was nearly time for dinner, Mako plucked her bottom lip. She could've sworn Ryuko helped Captain Basch and Steiner lock them away for stealing some fancy artwork. But a guard wouldn't like her. Which meant the Bagel Boys escaped and were seeking vengeance for being caught, "Hmm... Oh! They must have escaped thanks to the malicious intent of the Pancake Patrol!"

"Well... um..."

Pete stumbled at the woman's sheer ridiculousness, "... I'll, uh, let the captain know about them. Meantime, we gotta worry about her scissors!"

"Her scissors?"

"Can't have those things fallin' in the wrong hands, ya know!"

Making an effort to appear authentic and noble-like, especially when the broad had more than a few screws loose, he nodded, "They're too dangerous! Why, last I heard, if someone besides Ryuko tries using her fancy scissors, then kaboom! The world's blown to smithereens!"

"What!? No! Not smithereens!"

"That's right!"

This was almost too good to be true. The broad had to be messing with his head. Nobody was this darn stupid. Or naïve. Or dumb. Not even those goody two shoes hero types always prattling about saving innocent civilians and stopping the Heartless. Which was amusing in a pathetic and annoying sort of way. But this broad? She was *too* stupid. Almost like it was nothing but nothing. But two could play at that game! Nobody psychoanalyzed the great Pete and got away with it!

"So, if it's not too much trouble, could ya help me find -"

An explosion of vibrant rose-colored light through the window rendered him speechless.

"Gasp!"

As she pressed her face against the thin panes of quickly-fogging glass, cheeks smudged and deformed by her sheer happiness, Mako literally *gasped*, "Auntie Beatrix!"

The world was saved! Well, *more* saved since Ryuko already locked the fancy keyhole. But even so, Mako watched the amazing light streak over Lindblum like a magical comet before landing somewhere near the Theater District. Beatrix was super amazing! Not as amazing as Ryuko. But a close second! Or maybe a third because she almost forgot about Satsuki. Or fourth since Gamagori was super awesome and strong. But no matter how much she tried denying the truth, there was almost nothing quite like watching Ryuko tear through armies of darkness with Threadcutter.

"Oh, I want to see Beatrix fight the Heartless!"

She wanted to do a lot of things.

"But the Heartless are dangerous!"

She wanted to explore the stars alongside Ryuko and Gamagori.

"Then again, Beatrix is super strong. But I promised Ryuko not to do anything dangerous."

She wanted to relax and eat hamburgers while watching the sunset. Oh, and sea-salt ice cream.

"But I want to see Auntie Beatrix."

Mako sighed miserably while pressing her forehead against the foggy window. She wasn't a fighter like Ryuko. Or Satsuki. And definitely not like Auntie Beatrix, who could beat Ryuko in a friendly contest with one arm tied behind her back.

"But Gamagori's gonna be upset if I run off without telling him..."

And yet, more than anything in all the worlds, she wanted to have lots of fun with Ryuko. Magical things were fine and dandy. But she missed the days of hanging out with Ryuko and everyone without worrying about Heartless and dastardly villains and universe-spanning plots to destroy everything.

"Come on, Mako!"

Slapping her cheeks one after another, Mako huffed and clenched one hand into a trembling fist, "There's no need to worry about Ryuko! She'll win! She always wins!"

There was no time thinking about how cool and awesome it would be to watch Auntie Beatrix kick Heartless butt! The Heartless were dangerous. They stole people's hearts to make more of themselves. And they ate worlds like an all-you-can-eat buffet! Which was why she needed to get somewhere safe. After all, the only reason she was moping inside Ryuko's house was because she noticed her front door was wide open. And by wide open, she meant laying on the ground in several pieces. And because she and Gamagori lived right down the street thanks to Mister Cid.

"Well, I'll leave you alone, mister guard."

With her sandals sliding across the hardwood floor, Mako gave the strangely-quiet guard an inaccurate yet completely authentic version of the Lindblum salute, "After all, an ordinary housewife can't be expected to fight Heartless! Not without one of those fancy, super-duper powerful Keyblades!"

"Say, um, Miss - "

"Mako!"

Halfway towards the door, Mako spun on the spot, "Mako Mankanshoku! But you can call me Mako!"

"Err... right. Right..."

Pete found himself sweating. *A lot*. And not because of the ill-fitting armor chaffing his thighs, neck and that annoying point in the middle of his back. Something about the air-headed broad's name sounded familiar. Awfully familiar. He swore Maleficent mentioned someone called 'Mako' a couple of times. The answer seemed so obvious. It

clung to his tongue like last week's pizza. Scratching his chin, he turned away from Mako, eyes shifting ominously back and forth. He could almost remember why Mako's name felt important. And when he did remember, the answer smacked him across the face like a heavy sack of bricks.

The off-kilter woman was Ryuko's best friend.

Which was darn perfect for finding the scissors!

"So, uh, since ya know Ryuko, ya wouldn't happen ta know where she might've put her scissor sword?"

After making sure to give his best friendly smile, which he had lots of practice doing as Captain Justice back in the day, he added, "Gotta make sure nothin' happened to it, is all. With the Heartless runnin' around like they own the place, I gotta make sure the scissor swords weren't stolen by someone lookin' to take advantage of the mayhem and chaos. Like those underhanded Beagle Boys!"

"Oh... you don't need to worry about that, mister guard!"

"Really?"

"Nope!"

Clapping her hands together, fingers interlaced and sleeved blouse fluttering, Mako passionately pointed towards the stairs, "Whenever she's not around, or doing something besides fighting bad guys, Ryuko keeps the Scissor Blades in her room. Which would be bad. Like, super bad! But since she uses her Keyblade like a ginormous magical key, nobody can break into her room! Not even to read her diary! Well, nobody without a Keyblade. Anyway! When she went looking for Greg the other day, she took both scissors along for extra firepower just in case something super-duper bad happened!"

"Err... ya sure?"

"Pretty sure. Like about one hundred percent sure. I saw it with my own eyes! And Mako Mankanshoku never lies!"

It took Pete a few seconds to move beyond Mako's accidental rhyme, by which point she'd already started heading towards the front door.

"Well, see you later!"

Humming quietly to herself as she stepped into the normally quiet Lindblum autumn evening, explosions and the sounds of ongoing battle broken by airships flying overhead, Mako's brows furrowed. Gamagori wanted to help Captain Basch protect everybody from the Heartless. But fighting Heartless were dangerous. But he was strong. Not like Ryuko or Satsuki or even Auntie Beatrix. But strong enough to punch those pot-bellied Heartless with the funny hats straight into next week. She had to trust him. She had to believe in him.

She even had to... oh my gosh, in all the excitement about the Bagel Boys and the Pancake Patrol breaking into Ryuko's house she forgot about running off without telling Gamagori!

He was probably worried sick about her!

"Not so fast..."

Before she managed taking a single step through the door, the sweaty guard in the too-tight armor barred her path. He was grinning funnily. And in the right shadows almost looked menacing. But that couldn't be right. Because the only menacing things in Ryuko's house was her best friend's action figure collection. The one Satsuki claimed was getting a little too large to be healthy.

"You ain't going anywhere but with me, got it?"

"Huh?"

Blinking at the confusing threat, she craned her head backwards, "And why's that?"

"Ya ain't too sharp, are ya?"

Letting out a mocking snort, Pete thumped his chest. If he couldn't bring Maleficent those fancy scissor swords, he'd just have to get her the second-best thing. It was fool-proof. The perfect plan, "This here's a kidnapping. So, don't bother strugglin' or else I'm gonna hafta get real nasty and -"

WHAM!!!

It was more of a slap than a wham.

But the unexpected force behind her sandal slapping Pete across the face sent the criminal spinning sideways with a flabbergasted look in his eyes.

People always underestimated Mako Mankanshoku. They thought she was friendly and nice and outgoing and liked talking about lots of interesting topics involving her best friend in the entire universe. Which was true! She liked making friends! She liked hearing people talk about their lives, jobs and passions! She loved her husband even more than she loved her best friend. But just because she was a housewife who promised Ryuko not to get into dangerous fights didn't mean she was weak! Even if the odds were stacked against her, Mako Mankanshoku protected her friends and loves ones! She might not have her family anymore. But she had a new one! And no matter what, she'd protect them from the darkness!

"HELP!!! HELP!!!"

She didn't make it several feet before a large hand latched around her head and *lifted* her off the ground.

"I'M BEING KIDNAPPED BY A PERVERTED CRIMINAL WHO WANTS TO DO NASTY THINGS TO MY BEAUTIFUL BODY!!!"

"Quiet down!"

A throbbing red imprint of a sandal, right down to the tread marks and brand logo, stood burning on Pete's jaw as he stopped the crazy broad from fleeing into the streets, "This is an old-fashioned kidnapping! That means no funny business, got it! Besides, I ain't one of those people. / have standards, you know!"

"Standards? Like what?"

"Well... uh... that's none of yer business!"

Mako's change of tone, going from yelling and screaming to calm interest, momentarily threw Pete through a loop. But just as quickly, he regained his senses, tucking the air-headed woman under his right arm like a piece of stiff lumber, "Now shut up and keep quiet! Or else I'm gonna hafta make sure ya can't open yer big mouth!"

The threat seemed to work.

For about three seconds.

"SOMEBODY SAVE ME!!!"

Throwing caution to the wind, Pete sprinted across the plaza. All the screaming and shouting was giving him a headache. The broad's voice was like nails on a chalkboard. Almost like she was shredding his eardrums to bits and pieces. But holding onto Mako like a football, one of her sandals missing and the other dangling from her toes, he headed towards Captain Hook's ship. Which meant going through the Residential District towards the Grand Central Terminal.

"I'M TOO OLD TO BE KIDNAPPED LIKE A PRINCESS!!!"

"... just a little longer, Pete, and she'll be out of your hair for good..."

"SHNOOKUMS!!!"

It started as a faint tremble.

Then an earthquake.

And when the monstrous stomping grew louder and faster and heavily, coming closer and closer by the second, a sense of impending doom clinging to the air, Pete double-timed his efforts. Sucking in his gut, he tossed away his helmet and most of the ill-fitting armor. He summoned Heartless. Swarms of them. As many Heartless as Maleficent sent against Ryuko before that kid Sora came to their attention. It should've been enough. But relief twisted into nightmarish panic when Heartless started flying overhead, crashing into buildings with fist-shaped indents on their bodies.

All while the footsteps and the person causing the earth itself to tremble came ever closer...

Last edited: Jul 26, 2019

Chapter 14.2

*Apologies about the delay. But I needed this section to be *just* right. It took rewriting the ending three times for me to be happy with him. Enjoy.*

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/8/81/Deep_Dive_02_KHFM.png/800px-Deep_Dive_02_KHFM.png]

"There's... nothing?"

Her voice faded into the darkness. Shadows swallowed the echoes until nothing remained but deafening silence and whispers. As the sheer emptiness pressed upon her heart, Ryuko lowered Threadcutter. She looked around, eyes sweeping back and forth. And when it became obvious there weren't thousands of annoying Heartless waiting to devour her existence on the other side of Gilgamesh's portal into the darkness, she dismissed the Keyblade, crimson stars caressing her fingers. Right before they clenched into a fist.

"You sure this is the right place?"

She'd never been to the Realm of Darkness. As a matter of personal pride, this was only the second time she'd travelled through corridors of darkness. First when that fedora-wearing bastard helped her reach Terra before literally stabbing her in the back. And now Gilgamesh. It was somber. It was quiet. There was absolutely nothing. Just herself, an ocean stretching to the horizon in every direction, a full moon to the west. Or maybe the east. And a column of bubbling darkness leading back to Agrabah.

"Hey!"

When nobody answered, she glared over her shoulder, one corner of her mouth sporadically twitching, "I'm talking to you!"

Her voice echoed in the darkness. A strange, warbling reverberating that tickled the furthest depths of her heart. But once again, nobody answered because, of goddamn course, the six-armed bastard was stuck somewhere inside the darkness between *here* and Agrabah. Breathing deeply, finding the desire to drive her knee into the asshole's crotch for choosing now of all times to be overly dramatic, Ryuko shook an armored fist towards the writhing darkness before slouching forward.

"Ugh, whatever!"

Plunk!

Water gently splashed against her shins as she turned away from the darkness.

So, this was the Realm of Darkness, huh? It was worse than she expected. Even inside her Keyblade Armor, protected from the corruption, she could *feel* the emptiness. The negativity pressed against her heart. Yet with an annoyed snarl, she hooked two fingers beneath her chin, searched around until finding the nearly invisible seal, and yanked off her helmet.

Immediately the weird bitterness made her want to gag.

Something incredibly foul clung to the shadows. Not a smell like rotten food or old garbage piled in Lindblum's alleys. But an off-putting feeling impossible to really describe. A strange chill burned her ears and cheeks like she'd been standing out in the cold. Yet she wasn't cold. The darkness reminded her of wet dog. At the same time, it made her remember Satsuki's homebrewed tea whenever her big sis added new ingredients. Not that she complained. Oh wait, *she did*. Constantly. At least several times. Twice in the last month. But opening her mouth was a double-edged sword. Because

speaking her mind about Satsuki's horrible tea always ended in another lectures

Or Gamagori preaching about 'proper manners' and 'deserved respect' as if she wasn't a goddamn Keyblade Master!

"Shit."

The lukewarm chicken falafel was halfway into her mouth when Gilgamesh stumbled through his own portal, "Where the hell do I start looking?"

"How can you eat in a place like this?"

She heard the question.

It was literally impossible *not* hearing Gilgamesh when he shouted into your goddamn ear. It made her want to turn around and punch him in the fucking nose! But instead of lowering herself to his level, even if it would make her feel better, she kicked her heel against the ocean's surface, refusing to acknowledge the question altogether, "Crap, I wonder if we gotta go down there?"

"Grr! This is neither the time nor place for childish grudges, Ryuko!"

And just like that, the renowned swordsman's legendary temper flared into brilliance when she continued ignoring him.

"That's it! No one is permitted to mock the almighty Gilgamesh! Not if I can help it!"

Ryuko tracked the connoisseur's somewhat impressive forward flip, brows furrowing at his grunts, groans and assorted sounds. And when he finally landed, two different fingers on two hands inches from her face, she listened. Not out of respect. But because if she didn't let Gilgamesh finish his stupid speech, he'd keep trying and trying and trying until he forced her to make him physically shut his goddamn mouth.

"However, since you are my sworn rival, I shall repeat the question! But only once more!"

Taking a step backwards, Gilgamesh cleared his throat before pointing the same two fingers in her general direction, "How can you eat in a place such as this!?"

"Because I'm *hungry*."

An entire piece of roasted chicken covered in garlic, onions and various spices slid into her mouth as she answered the blatantly obvious question. Why the hell did anyone eat if they weren't hungry? An idiot could have answered his question without breaking a sweat. Even Mako, of all people, could have given Gilgamesh an answer before adding another several stories about her afternoon, morning and her latest dreams. But it appeared that wasn't what the guy wanted to hear. Before she managed to chomp down on the chicken, savoring what remained of her lunch, Gilgamesh threw two pairs of arms into the air.

"That makes no sense! You shouldn't *be* hungry!"

Salted chicken, fried dough and several different vegetables clung to Ryuko's lips, "Well, I am!"

While she thoroughly enjoyed messing with Gilgamesh, she knew where the guy was talking about. Every master worth their Keyblade knew the Realm of Darkness wasn't the most normal place. It was the furthest thing from normal. The complete opposite. A shadow cast by the light. She didn't fully understand it. And maybe she never would. But according to everything she'd read in the castle library, plus Beatrix's helpful advice, time was seriously messed up inside the place. It *existed*. Time didn't just vanish. More like it stopped or froze or paused.

Anyone trapped inside this godforsaken hellscape never needed to eat or sleep. Shit, they'd probably never age another day. But the darkness would slowly and steadily corrode their hearts. Eventually,

they'd become another Heartless among millions. If the Heartless didn't find them first.

In other words, a really shitty version of immortality.

"Because while you took your sweet-ass time talkin' with Merlin, I missed breakfast!"

Being 'hungry' in a place where time hit the fricking pause button was slightly concerning. She understood Gilgamesh's point of view, not that she'd ever say anything. Yet like a shit-ton of nonsense involving light and darkness, she rolled with the punches. Life Fibers were goddamn weird. It was that simple. And she had no intent on getting a headache worrying about breaking natural laws, "And like *hell* I'm missing lunch!"

"But -"

Her eyes narrowed, "But *what!*?"

"But... oh, forget it!"

A consequential moment must've passed inside Gilgamesh's peanut-sized mind. Because the guy seemed conflicted. Really conflicted. She could see the single wheel and half-starved hamster spinning round and round. Yet instead of opening his mouth and wasting more time arguing over pointless bullshit, he threw his hands back into the air, turned around and pulled down the red scarf covering his mouth, "There isn't time enough in the day to explain how many rules of nature you're breaking!"

"Blah! Blah! Blah!"

Shoving the last chunk of falafel into her mouth, Ryuko swallowed before taking another look around, "Anyway, you sure this is the right place? This ain't some between realm, right?"

"Of course, I am!"

For some odd reason, Gilgamesh didn't sound all that confident. And that got her attention. The guy always blustered about being the 'greatest this' or 'most infamous that.' And her suspicions were confirmed when the bastard scratched his forehead, turned to his left, then right, then back to his left, nearly smacked her in the fricking face with his stupid naginata when he spun around on the spot and folded his arms.

"Hmm, between you and me, Ryuko, I've always stuck to the shores of the Realm Between."

As he cautiously walked a few steps across the ocean in the opposite direction of the moon and looked around, one pair of arms planted upon his hips, Gilgamesh's painted features furrowed, "Never strayed this far into the darkness. Kind of unnerving if you ask me."

"Good thing I ain't asking then."

Threadcutter reappeared, spreading from her fingers in streams of vermilion light and crimson stars, "Now if you're done complaining, we gotta find Mickey."

"Do we *have* to?"

Gilgamesh had nothing against the Realm of Darkness. It was, after all, the perfect place to lay low following every adventure, successful or otherwise. Since Keyblade Masters, those annoying sorcerers and other defenders of light refused to traverse the darkness out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness, he didn't need to concern himself with unexpected ambushes. Only those whose hearts were blackened by darkness, such as Maleficent's afterschool social club and that other organization, could easily follow him into the shadows.

Yet for a variety of reasons, legitimate or otherwise, he refused to associate with either consortium.

"This place is *literally* endless!"

Which brought him to lesson number three - naïve fools with little appreciation for venerable and legendary swords. The nerve of some people! How could anyone believe locking a fabled weapon, its blade honed by blood and flesh through countless battles and deadly combat, inside a dusty vault to gather rust alongside pointless treasure was a good idea? The nightmarish thought of Kikuichimonji ending up as some museum piece alongside the Genji Armor, right next to a small plaque on the wall, sent shivers racing down his spine like ice cold water.

"We could be here forever!"

Was he being a tad too dramatic? Perhaps. Well, *yeah*. Yes, he was. But that simply underscored how dangerous it was for semi-normal people, such as himself and Ryuko, to traverse the darkness.

"Besides, the mouse probably already succumbed to darkness! No point sticking around if he's already a Heartless."

SHINK!!!

Threadcutter left her shoulder before the bastard finished his nonsensical bullshit.

"We're gonna find Mickey."

Four words. Four simple words.

That's all it took to shut Gilgamesh up.

And a Keyblade aimed squarely between his eyes.

"Err... uh... sorry."

The bastard's apology helped. A little. But not nearly enough to doss the emotions writhing inside her heart.

Biting the inside of her cheek, Ryuko stared towards the horizon, refusing to say anything. She'd never say it, but she needed to give

the guy credit. Gilgamesh apologizing for *anything* was nearly impossible. She'd have more luck convincing Satsuki her eyebrows were thick instead of tapering. And while it wasn't so much an apology than an attempt to avoid having Threadcutter shoved up his ass, she took it. Because being angry wouldn't get her anywhere. It wouldn't help save the worlds. It wouldn't help her find Mickey.

And it wouldn't help protect everything she cherished.

A soft breath in.

A tense breath out.

This was simply one of *those* goddamn days.

"Now shut up and let me think."

The darkness spoke. Not with sounds and words, but feelings and emotions. Always trying to worm its way into her heart. To connect with her own powerful darkness. Yet she ignored it. Instead, closing her eyes and exhaling through slightly parted lips, Ryuko focused on her inner light and warmth.

And just like that, the darkness faded into the back of her mind. The bitter chill carried on shadows disappeared as she pressed one hand over her heart, the rhythmic *thump-thump* offering familiar comfort. Without anger and irritation clouding her heart, she could sense him. Mickey. He was out there. But his light was faint. Real faint. Way in the distance behind a lot of darkness. Far enough away that she didn't know how long it was going to take to find him. But Mickey was alright. He was okay. She should have been relieved. Maybe gloating to Gilgamesh about being dead wrong.

But something else caused her eyes to snap open.

Maybe it was some darkness-related bullshit screwing with her memories. Or the place taking advantage of her guilt and regrets to pull some nasty trick. But no matter how hard she tried focusing

specifically on Mickey's light, something she *knew* existed and was out there, the other presence refused to disappear. It remained out there, a beacon of dimmed light against the darkness.

"Alright..."

Her voice might've remained steady, but Threadcutter trembled. Her fingers squeezed the Keyblade far beyond the point most metals would have long since buckled. But the magical weapon remained unfazed by the treatment. She trusted her heart. It never led her astray. As long as she believed in herself, Mako and Satsuki, as well as their friends, nothing could bring them down. This was no different. Even if Aqua was out there... even if her heart was telling the truth and Aqua had been trapped in this godforsaken place for the last ten years without anyone for company... she needed to stay focused.

Find Mickey.

Close the Door to Darkness.

Leave with Gilgamesh, Mickey and Aqua.

Simple.

"... if you're done complaining, let's find Mickey! This place is starting to give me the creeps."

A discontent muttering was the multiarmed swordsman's immediate response, "I still think we should leave."

"Oh my god, shut the hell up!"

Rolling her eyes, the corner of her mouth twisted into a snarl, "Complain again and not only will I shove Threadcutter up your ass, I'll hand your stupid collection over to Beatrix!"

"Humph!"

Anyone else would have cowered before such inhuman frustration. The power of a fully-fledged Keyblade wielder was no joke. Ryuko might lack some of her master's more frightening qualities, but he wasn't nearly drunk or foolish enough to personally determine the extent of those differences. It would take a heck of a lot of sake to work up that amount of liquid courage. And yet he, the greatest swordsman in all the realms, both light and darkness, was frustrated! And for good reason! After dropping everything he was doing to assist Ryuko's imbecilic endeavor to save the universe or something - oh, and the mouse - from certain destruction at the growing hordes of Heartless, did he get a thank you? A heartfelt moment of appreciation?

No.

He received nothing but threats.

"You're the rudest woman I've had the misfortune of knowing!"

Haphazardly brushing aside Threadcutter with the back of his middle right hand, he metaphorically spat in the woman's direction. That was a half-truth. Well, more than a truth that was dependent on the day. Now that he really thought about it, Ryuko was the second rudest woman he knew. There was Lani in fourth after that incident on Daguerreo. Maleficent took third only because she tried cursing him with dark magic after he refused to join her stupid group. But compared to Ryuko, that blonde woman in the black coat with the sadistic streak irked him far more than anyone in the universe.

"And to think I'd believed us sworn rivals! Friends even, on a good day!"

Ryuko couldn't help but roll her eyes at the pathetic outpouring of emotions and feelings.

"Whatever."

Bickering with Gilgamesh was always fun and super exciting, like getting teeth pulled, but something caught her attention.

It wasn't Mickey. Or Aqua, if it really was Aqua and not a figment of her imagination or the darkness playing tricks on her heart. She wasn't sure. She couldn't be certain. But far over the horizon, beyond what she could see or hear but not what her heart could feel, something stirred. Something really bad. Unnervingly bad. But everything seemed normal. Nothing moved or transformed. Yet looking back and forth, one corner of her lip sucked into her mouth, pulse racing a mile a minute, Ryuko swore something really important changed.

"Alright..."

The slightest unease clung to her voice as she swung Threadcutter away from Gilgamesh. And for good reason. Her heart and instincts were in complete agreement. Sticking around in one place for too long would be goddamn stupid, "Lead the way."

"Uh, what?"

"You heard me!"

Despite standing upon an uncharted ocean within an endless realm of pure darkness, surrounded by nothing but emptiness, misery and despair, Ryuko felt pure annoyance. And that frustration translated into Threadcutter swinging several degrees towards the swordsman, "How many times have you *bragged* about hiding in this goddamn place! Time to put your experience to good use!"

"Lies and slander!"

Childishly balking at the insinuation that he was, in any way, shape or form, an expert on traversing the Realm of Darkness, Gilgamesh collapsed onto the solidified water, legs crossed over one another, Kikuichimonji leaning against his left shoulder, "Only fools dare traverse the darkness with impunity! Even I, the great Gilgamesh, do

not stay longer than absolutely necessary! This darkness feeds upon one's insecurities and doubts! It's far too dangerous for an afternoon stroll! A Keyblade Master of your renown and notoriety should know this!"

"Yeah? And so fricking what!?"

Water splashed underneath Ryuko's feet when she pivoted on the spot, finally facing the bastard, "If I started doubting myself now, I'd never have time to kick your ass when we get out of this place!"

"Bah! This argument's completely pointless!"

Gilgamesh's painted features scrunched in noticeable annoyance. Nearly matching Ryuko's frustration, if not in strength than physical resemblance.

"How did you rope me into your insane shenanigans?"

Propping one hand underneath his chin, another scratching his cheek, two clenched into fists against the water and a fifth adjusting the askew kabuto, he looked around the desolate landscape, "Ugh, I should've taken my chances with Beatrix!"

"Excuses! Excuses!"

A flash of light muffled Ryuko's voice as her head vanished inside metal and glass, "Life's not fair, get used to it!"

Ten years ago - hell, five years ago -sitting in a stuffy library would have made her vomit. But things changed. As Satsuki said, she matured into an 'acceptable' woman, whatever the hell that meant. She wasn't the same punk-ass high school drifter hitchhiking across Japan, beating the shit out of people while hunting clues about the bitch who killed her dad. She was a Keyblade Master. That meant responsibility. She couldn't afford doing crap halfheartedly or being lazy or assuming things would miraculously turn out alright.

She might not be a nerd like Inumuta, but that didn't mean she was stupid.

When Mickey first mentioned the stupid door, she did some research of her own. And by that, she meant a lot of goddamn research. Weeks of research in the stuffy library, a bag of chips and Mako her only company. Not only about the door, but the Realm of Darkness and how the place functioned. The types of Heartless lurking inside the shadows. The various ins and outs. Stuff most people overlooked. Or were too afraid of reading out of some weird belief about ink on paper somehow corrupting their hearts.

Which was grade-a bullshit.

"Now stop stalling!"

Aiming her Keyblade opposite the moon, where the darkness felt thicker and heavier, she spat, "Mickey's waiting for -"

In the darkness, beyond sight and sound yet existing in a place both near and far, something shifted.

Underneath her feet, the water turned viscous.

"What the -"

As if on cue, shadows exploded off the ocean. Darkness writhed around her feet as whirlpools. Purple-black miasma wafted from the eddies. Waves splashed her knees only to reach higher. Displaced water rained downwards alongside embers of burning darkness. In the blink of an eye, the world went to complete and utter shit. But faster than Mako falls asleep during every Lindblum play, she backpedaled out of the conflagration. Sliding between turbulent waves and over the darkness seeking entrance into her heart, Ryuko's gaze suddenly snapped sideways.

" - hell?"

She might have been surprised.

Hell, she *was* surprised.

But that didn't change a goddamn thing! When the monstrous freak finally emerged from the swirling darkness, its massive body with the heart-shaped hole looming over everything else in the godforsaken place, she clenched the hand not currently holding Threadcutter into a fist, knuckles bleeding white and armor creaking. Taking a staggered breath, she quickly gathered magic into a glowing point between her fingers. A lot of magic. A shit-ton of unstable magic. And when the Heartless more than twenty times her size reached forward, she cocked her arm back, sneered and *punched* existence itself.

"FLARE PUNCH!!!"

She immediately felt pain.

Yet that meant it was working.

The white-hot flames didn't simply disintegrate the Darkside. They *obliterated* the Heartless. Faster than her Life Fibers fixed the damage, regenerating muscles charred to a blackened crisp by the unstable yet powerful magic, weaving together skin and flesh until her hand was as good as new, its upper body vanished within the conflagration.

As did another *two* Darkside.

"SHIT!!!"

With both feet, she kicked off the water, light spilling from Threadcutter as the Keyblade *exploded* into a massive crimson and gold greatsword.

"I AIN'T THROUGH YET!!!"

The details sucked. The situation sucked ass. And she hated everything about the moment. But the Realm of Darkness was the perfect place to finally cut loose and show the Heartless just how powerful she really was. No innocent civilians and bystanders meant no reason to limit herself. No buildings meant no collateral damage. And unlike that bullshit in Twilight Town, she was fighting monsters that actually stayed dead when she stabbed them with a goddamn Keyblade.

Twisting midair on currents of tempestuous aerial magic, crimson streaming off her armor, moving alongside the same gusts carrying her forward, Ryuko didn't give the Heartless to strategize. Not that they could. Because they were fricking Heartless. And there were more of them now. At least ten of them. Instead of wasting time bickering with Gilgamesh, who vanished sometime between then and now, she turned to the nearest Darkness.

Her knees bent as armor-covered feet pushed against solidified air.

She glared at the clawed fingers reaching towards her.

In a burst of inhuman momentum, flickering along streams of vermilion light, she floated behind the Darkside, Threadcutter held sideways in her right hand.

And the accompanying, yet somewhat delayed, explosion *disintegrated* the unfortunate Heartless before it knew what happened.

"RAGHHHH!!!"

Spittle covered the inside of her visor as Threadcutter destroyed every Heartless within arm's range. As one fell under the assault, another rose to take its friend's place only to quickly disintegrate. Lithe muscles betraying monstrous strength competed against, then overwhelmed, darkness born of the hearts of mankind. Strained ligaments and bruised flesh healed faster than damage arrived. Feathery hair matted against her sweaty forehead shimmered with

vermillion brilliance. And as she flipped and danced between the Heartless, using one as a springboard to go after another, a single thought surfaced in her heart.

Formchanges kicked fricking ass.

"HHHHHAAAAHHHH!!!!!"

Hefting the transformed Keyblade overhead, legs bent backwards and muscles pulling taut underneath her armor, she glared into the last Darkside's bright yellow eyes before swinging downwards with every ounce of strength she could muster, not only bisecting the bastard right down the middle but carving a large trench several hundred feet through the turbulent ocean *behind* it.

Plip-Plop.

She barely had enough time to catch her breath when more Heartless emerged.

Plip-Plop.

"AW, COME ON!!!"

The newcomers looked exactly the same as the old Heartless.

Only larger.

And by larger, she meant goddamn gigantic.

It took craning her head backwards just to get a good look at them. And if the situation wasn't so screwed up, she might've whistled. She didn't know which were taller. These assholes or Ragyo Kiryuin's giant COVERS. But at this point, it didn't matter. What did matter, here and now, were the subtle differences. Like the glowing tattoos covering their stupidly-weird bodies. Or that some were purple, green and blue instead of standard black. Or the red-tipped claws longer than her body. Or the darkness surrounding their bodies like smoke.

But cosmetic differences didn't matter when every pair of glowing yellow eyes - hundreds of them - were staring directly at her.

"SCREW YOU!!!"

Her anger clung to the darkness as she threw herself towards the approaching Heartless. But not for a drawn-out, slugfest. Not that she couldn't win. She could. But fighting bastards like these Darkside wannabes didn't help find Mickey. Inside this place, where darkness was infinite and light reduced to whatever existed inside her heart, it accompanied the exact opposite. Every moment wasted slicing through flesh-like shadows was time not spent finding Mickey and closing the Door to Darkness. She needed room to think. She needed space to catch her breath.

And more important than either of those things, she needed a lot more distance.

She bent her knees and launched forward, crimson light trailing behind her arms and legs. Without blinking, or even turning her gaze sideways, Threadcutter flickered, deflecting the incoming sphere of burning darkness back to sender. An explosion she heard rather than felt thanks to the Heartless standing between the Darkside and her current location. And at the last moment, she flipped forward, grasped solid emptiness with outstretched finger and used the midair pivot as a fulcrum to spin around and smash both feet into another giant Heartless.

It felt like kicking wet playdoh.

But that didn't stop her from sending the several-story tall bastard *flying* through dozens of its friends before crashing to the ground.

And by the time its back slammed into the water, sending waves rippling across the ocean, she was already hundreds of feet into the air.

"Holy..."

Her lips parted at the unexpected sight.

"... crap."

It was worse than she thought. More of the massive bastards were emerging from the shadows. With every passing second, at least a dozen more joined their ranks. And *thousands* of other Heartless were swarming over the horizons like a literal goddamn tidal wave.

She needed to act *fast*.

"Alright then, time for plan b."

Once again, not for the first time, she was sort of, but not really, happy to be in the Realm of Darkness. Only because without having to constantly worrying about innocent bystanders getting into harm's way, or the Heartless breaking away from the fight to devour some hearts, or some buildings being too structurally unstable to survive a few punches and intense explosions, she could somewhat relax. No back-from-the-dead nonsense. No preaching villains. Just an endless tide of Heartless, her Keyblade and the determination to do everything possible to find Mickey, close the Door to Darkness and save everyone in the universe.

Simple and straightforward.

"HEY GILGAMESH!!!"

She didn't know if Gilgamesh could hear her. But doing what she was about to do and *not* warning the guy, who was probably long gone at this point, which meant she'd need to bust out of this place and beat the living shit out of him, didn't sit well with her heart.

"GET YOUR ASS MOVIN'!"

Hovering hundreds of feet above countless Heartless eager to devour her heart, Ryuko leaned backwards until she was upside-down.

"BECAUSE I AIN'T..."

In a flash of brilliant crimson, Threadcutter returned to its default form. And as she grasped the Keyblade with both hands and pulled it towards her waist, the weapon transformed once more.

"... GONNA..."

The cacophony of industrial metal grinding against itself made her teeth her. Before she finished grabbing Threadcutter towards her waist, one hand holding the handle and the other gripping its teeth, it metamorphosized into an oversized, massive railgun nearly twice the length of her body from head to foot.

"... HOLD..."

One eye half-closed as Threadcutter's blades spun faster and faster.

"... BACK!"

Ryuko felt sweat pooling against the back of her neck. Her fingers latched around Threadcutter, knuckles white from the pressure. But only when the crimson-gold sigil bearing painful resemblance to Senketsu manifested in front of the barrel, did she gnashed her teeth, take one last look around the roiling darkness for Gilgamesh and squeezed the mental trigger.

"KISARAGI NOVA!!!"

Chapter 14.3

OUTSKIRTS OF LINDBLUM

NINE YEARS AGO

"So, uh, thanks for comin' on such short notice."

Her fingers scratched at her temple, catching several bangs of feathery hair between them.

"I wouldn't have asked if it wasn't really important."

Even if things were peaceful, Beatrix took her duties as a Keyblade Master seriously. Goddamn seriously. Only a handful of Heartless might be popping up around the worlds. Nothing like the Unversed. Normal stuff. Nothing like what happened to her world. There were whispers, on the other hand, of various assholes trying to destroy that well-deserved quiet with their own annoying crap. Like Maleficent, some no-name witch with an ego and inflated sense of self-importance the size of Lindblum's Grand Castle. It should've been important. But from what she'd heard through the grapevine, and by grapevine she meant listening to Mako and Yuna bond over sea salt ice cream, the black mage paid the evil fairy a very personal visit.

So, she doubted Maleficent would do anything stupid.

Not unless the fairy wanted a literal meteor dropped on her fricking head.

"Anyway..."

But that wasn't why Beatrix was scouring the Realm of Light.

New types of Heartless, ones with strange heart-shaped emblems, were appearing across the Realm of Light. They weren't particularly

stronger or smarter than the old ones. But weird creatures appearing out nowhere? Call it intuition or instinct or the ability to see bullshit coming from a mile away, but she didn't need to be a genius to realize something was seriously messed up.

"... Formchanges."

Refusing to waste any more time beating around the bush, not when Beatrix was probably annoyed at being dragged halfway across the universe, she frowned, "How do I pull it off?"

"Ah."

Subtle amusement clung to the midsummer breeze alongside that faint acknowledgement. Standing across from her erstwhile student, Beatrix tilted her head forward, pondering the question with purposeful deliberation. As she did so, knee-high grass green with life and interspaced by flowers of various colors brushed against their thighs. Sea mist and pollen filled every breath. The King Eds Plains rippled as if some greater being took notice of its momentary importance. Waves danced and spun across the amber-green field covered with knolls and small hills, some of which bore weathered outposts and long-abandoned guard stations.

"Ah?"

Ryuko blinked as a cargo airship passed overhead on its way to Lindblum, "What the hell do you mean 'ah'?"

"Is that any way to talk to your master?"

With her remaining arm folded underneath her bosom, Beatrix's purplish-red eye narrowed, immediately derailing the newest master's circular train of thought, "For someone looking for answers, you're not giving me any reason to divulge them."

"You REALLY want me to apologize?"

It wasn't smart backtalking someone who, even with one arm, could effortlessly kick her ass, but warily standing her ground, Ryuko snorted when her former master shook her head.

"In a matter of speaking."

Beatrix nonchalantly retorted while subtly shifting her posture in such a way that it looked as if she was listing slightly to the left, "The 'why' should be blatantly obvious. After all, you were the one who pulled me away from my duties. Duties that, as a master yourself, you're also neglecting. Do you think the Heartless wait while we hold this conversation?"

The truth hurt.

"Tch!"

But not as much as everything else.

"Yeah, you're right."

Another airship swung through the skies, kicking up gusts of wind that made their hair flutter and sway. But swallowing her pride, not for the first time and probably not the last time this month, Ryuko jabbed a hand into her pocket. Self-pity accomplished nothing but jack shit. She knew it. Satsuki knew it. And she was damn certain Beatrix knew it long before she'd asked such a stupid question, "I'm sorry. But this is important to me! I had to ask ya!"

"Hmm..."

The sound of dirt crunching underneath armored boots when Beatrix shifted her center of mass forced Ryuko to wonder what her master was thinking. But after what felt like an entire hour, but couldn't have been longer than a minute, maybe two, the handicapped Keyblade Master arched an eyebrow, slight bemusement radiating from her heart, "Well then, please indulge my wild curiosity. Who might've told you about Formchanges?"

"Yen Sid."

Ryuko didn't like Beatrix's attitude. Not one bit, "He wanted to know why you never taught me something so damn useful!"

A thin eyebrow quirked, "Yen Sid said that?"

"Well... no."

The unstated threat was more than enough to send shivers racing down Ryuko's spine, "But that's not important! What IS important is you keeping something like that secret!"

"You were an exceptionally gifted student."

For the first time since arriving upon Lindblum, Beatrix addressed Ryuko not as a master to a student. Or an adult to a child. But as equals, "How often did the Knights of Pluto discover you practicing magic in the dead of night? When I said you couldn't possibly master Seiken, you spent a week proving me wrong. And now, here you stand a Keyblade Master. A hero to this world. A savior to countless others who will never know your name. By all rights, you accomplished more than some masters did in their entire lifetimes. Even my own deeds all but pale in comparison to yours."

Staring into Ryuko's lowering eyes, she once more tossed her voluminous hair over her shoulder, allowing the chestnut brown bangs to fall graciously against her back.

"Surely, with all that, you don't require more power?"

"This isn't about power!"

"Isn't it?"

"No! It isn't!"

As she shouted, refusing to back down despite knowing the slightest misstep could leave her questions unanswered, Ryuko hissed

between her teeth. It was damn obvious what Beatrix was doing. She hadn't spent an entire month getting her ass kicked by someone who could've given Ragyo Kiryuin a run for her money without learning a few useful tidbits. It was the reason she held back from saying anything else. And why her anger dissipated, leaving her standing across from one of the few people she genuinely respected without anything apart from the truth on her lips.

"I know what you want me to say."

Dark black hair, individual strands of crimson between them, rustled and swayed on the wind. They tickled her forehead and nose, all while the hand tucked inside her pocket steadily clenched into a fist.

"But I ain't gonna say it."

Another airship passed overhead, disturbing a flock of Trick Sparrows leaving their nests on Lindblum's outer walls.

"Look, I don't like bein' bossed around or told what to do."

Reaching towards the Scissor Blade dangling from her neck only to stop upon realizing it was back home, hanging in Mako's temporary bedroom until she could find a better place for them to live, Ryuko lowered her hand, "Never liked listenin' to authority. Never appreciated people pushing their rules down my throat. That ain't no excuse. Or apology. Just facts."

Mako always knew the right thing to say to cheer her up. It might've been embarrassing or personal, maybe both at the same time with a little bit of mortification thrown into the pile for good measure. But it worked. So did Satsuki, in her big sis's own awkward way. And for a few special moments, when she'd start arguing with Satsuki about being too nosy for her own good or cover Mako's mouth with her hands and tell her to shut up, she could forget everything bad that happened.

"But it's the damn truth."

She wanted to shout at Beatrix. She wanted to scream her ass raw. She wanted to demand her own master explain everything. But all too aware of the emotions filling her heart, light and darkness fumbling for dominance only to clash and burn away into nothing, Ryuko chose another path. Yelling at the top of her lungs might feel great. It might make the massive weight on her heart feel like it disappeared. But she wasn't the same punk who snapped at the slightest provocation. She couldn't afford to be. Not with so many people around all the worlds counting on her.

"Just tell me one thing."

And the person who helped her get this far, all without expecting anything in return, not even so much as a thank you, was standing in front of her.

"Why didn't you teach it to me?"

Thin clouds passed in front of the sun, sporadically blanketing the grassy plains in solar twilight, as she waited for Beatrix's answer.

"Because you weren't ready."

It felt like someone punched her in the gut.

For several excruciating seconds, Ryuko wondered if she actually heard those words. That maybe she imagined them. But the look on her master's face shattered those delusions, "Say what!?"

"When we first met, standing opposite that field outside Alexandria, your heart was plagued by hatred."

A brilliant flash of pearlescent pink foretold Save the Queen manifesting into Beatrix's outstretched and waiting fingers, "You desired finding your friend and sister more than vengeance against the one who took away your world. Yet darkness lurked within your heart. While your light is strong, and has always been strong, I

feared that darkness, fueled by pain I cannot hope to fathom, would eventually consume your heart."

Light shimmered upon the rose-colored metal as Ryuko couldn't gather the courage to refuse her words.

"As your master, I attempted to relieve you of that pain."

Chestnut brown hair rustled when a cargo ship passed too close to the ground, sending rippling waves expanding across King Eds Plains. Strands fell in front of her eye, brushing against the silver eyepatch covering the right side of her face.

"Yet despite my best efforts, I failed."

Save the Queen descended until its blade gently caressed the soil as she shook her head, "The only one who could understand that which plagued your heart... and the means necessary to overcome that incomparable pain... was someone who shared that pain. All I could do was guide you down the path. To be your guiding light. To believe my student, the one who stood against Ardyn Lucis Caelum without concern for her own life, would make the right decision. Nothing more. And nothing less."

"Yeah."

Eventually rediscovering her voice, Ryuko stared at a random stalk of grass.

"I was going through some tough shit."

Memories surfaced within her heart. Painful memories. Good memories. Happy memories. And in-between memories. Mako's smile on the first day of their new school year. Satsuki's attempt at cracking a joke. Gamagori's stuttering confession to Mako while crushing a bouquet of fresh flowers. Mako trying some Kirman Coffee only to spit the expensive stuff across old man Morrid's mustached face.

"But it's like you've always said..."

Her fingers dug into her palms, introducing pain no amount of Life Fiber healing could overcome.

"... I can't go around focusing on the past."

Crimson flickered from the depths of her heart.

"Not when I have people, here and now, counting on me."

The twinkling light caressed her fingers, winding spiraling paths outwards alongside shimmering vermilion stars.

"That's why I dragged your ass out here! Not because I want more power!"

Her lips twitched, as if confused between frowning and smiling, when Threadcutter erupted into existence. With nothing holding her heart back, she shouted, voice breaking and throat turning raw. Not out of anger. Or pain. But pure and unrelenting determination.

"Or because I'm hunting some sociopathic freak lookin' to destroy everything!"

The Keyblade which once possessed razor-sharp wings, painful to touch yet equally deadly to those standing between herself and what she desired, shimmered brightly in the afternoon sunlight. Smooth and curving patterns bearing resemblance to a well-stitched quilt, orange-yellow to some and golden to others, surrounded the ruby shaft as she flipped her Keyblade around her fingers before stabbing it straight into the ground. An impact that sent crimson light rippling across the somber plains.

"But because I want to protect Mako!"

Threadcutter stood nearly to her chest, slightly longer than the Scissor Blades but still shorter than Decapitation Mode.

Yet holding onto the Keyblade with one hand, mouth cocked in a half-snarl, she jabbed a thumb against her heart, "I never want to see her cry! Or frown or look sad! And I don't EVER want to hear her joke about her mom and dad and brother and Guts bein' lost with a smile that never reaches her eyes! Even if that means sacrificing my heart, I'll protect Mako with my goddamn life! No matter what it takes!"

"Ah..."

Again, just like the first time, a quizzical tone accompanied Beatrix's uncharacteristic response, "And what about Satsuki?"

Ryuko just about rolled her eyes at the stupid comment.

"Eh, Satsuki can take care of herself."

And wasn't that the truth. Ever since Terra took down Xehanort, Ardyn disintegrated and Vanitas disappeared, her sis alternated between three things - training, reading and spending as much time with her as humanly possible. Oh, and talking with Scrooge about business stuff. It was why she pointed over her shoulder towards Lindblum, barely concealed annoyance plucking at her eyebrow, "She's a grown woman. Besides, she'd get all grumpy if she heard me call her weak and stuff."

"Hmm..."

Allowing the faintest of smiles to grace her features, Beatrix turned aside, marching through the knee-high grass away from her erstwhile apprentice, "Very well. I shall teach you."

"Huh?"

Beatrix's lips further quirked, creasing the skin around her eyepatch, "Do you remember the first thing I taught you about the Keyblade?"

"The first?"

What kind of question was that? Repeating it several times for emphasis, once out loud and the rest in her head, Ryuko scratched the back of her temple. All while the mocking call of a Trick Sparrow echoed almost directly overhead. Damn it, she couldn't remember. It had to be something simple or straightforward. Beatrix wasn't the sort of person to give obnoxious word puzzles or riddles, "Uh... wasn't it somethin' about Keyblades being extensions of the heart? But what does that -"

The answer smashed against her heart with the force of a Kamui-powered kick.

And in response, Beatrix proudly nodded.

"Very good."

Expertly adjusting her grip around Save the Queen, Beatrix shifted her stance, moving her right foot several inches sideways, heel digging into the soil, "Keyblades are the manifestations of the heart. The Keyblade is the heart. And the heart is the Keyblade. What you call 'Formchange' is a contemporary sobriquet for complete understanding of oneself. To accept both light and darkness. To accept your faults and strengths. It's neither easy nor straightforward. Every path is different from another's. Even if I wished to do so, I could not start you down the path."

"Huh..."

"Uh-huh..."

Yanking her Keyblade out of the ground, Ryuko shook dirt and grass from the quilt-like teeth, "You sayin' it's something I gotta figure out on my own?"

"In a manner of speaking."

The handicapped master gently swung her arm, sending a harmless blast of rose-colored light across the plains, "But I suppose a

demonstration could not hurt."

Nothing immediately changed.

And then everything changed when Beatrix uttered one simple word.

"Alexander."

The nine blades floating around Beatrix looked like someone took Save the Queen, decided they wanted an actual sword, and then duplicated it eight more times. Golden wings bearing more than a cursory resemblance to Alexandria's coat-of-arms twisted around crossguards. Rose-pink metal embedded within mithril glowed. Not shined. Or shimmered. But downright glowed with inner light. A light that twinkled almost like mist in the rain as the nine swords hovered around her old master, moving in time with Beatrix's relaxed breathing.

"Heh, no wonder Xehanort was too chickenshit to fight you."

Clasped in Beatrix's left hand was a shield nearly large enough she'd bet Gamagori, wherever the bastard was, would have trouble lugging it around Lindblum. Leaning slightly to the right, then the left, then back to the right, all while staring at the golden Keyblade shield - keyshield - with pink patterns looping around the outside like rose petals and thorns, Ryuko propped Threadcutter onto her shoulder and smirked.

"You'd probably kick his wrinkly ass without breaking a sweat!"

That faint smile was getting really old, really fast.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps not."

Aware of her former student's frustration, Beatrix smiled, drawing further annoyance, all while gold and rose light drizzling from the nine blades floating around her body, "No matter how different one's heart might be, whether they associate themselves with light or

darkness, or something in-between, acceptance of oneself is required to truly master the Keyblade."

"Huh."

Once she was certain Beatrix had nothing else to say, Ryuko's lips pursed together.

"I guess that makes sense."

Propping Threadcutter across her shoulder, she carefully combed over the familiar philosophy. It made sense. A lot of sense. But still, it couldn't be that simple, could it? These sorts of things were never straightforward. Just like magic. It's one thing watching someone shoot fire from their hands. It's another thing trying it yourself without getting blasted in the face or second-degree burns. All she needed to do was accept everything about herself, both the good and ugly? The more she thought about it, the more it made a lot of sense. She could almost grasp the picture in her mind. But there had to be something else. Something she was missing. A clue or hidden meaning.

"It's that simple, Ryuko."

The unprompted answer snapped Ryuko from her thoughts.

"Really?"

Shaking her head, nose twitching at the thickening smell of sea mist clinging to the wind, her fingers tightened around Threadcutter, "I'm not sayin' you're wrong. But you always said it's impossible completely understand the heart. So, to me, it just sounds, I dunno, suspicious for THAT to be a requirement. That's why you gotta be pulling my leg."

"Hmm..."

Again, her former master hummed in that condescending, I-know-more-than-you, way that really got underneath her skin.

"Did I actually say that?"

"Yeah! Yeah you did!"

"Ah..."

"Don't go startin' that again!"

"You're rather tightly wound today, Ryuko."

Nodding to herself, a smile stretching across her face at Ryuko's glower, Beatrix made the requisite motion, transforming Save the Queen back to normal before dismissing the Keyblade altogether. And then promptly tossed thick and voluminous bangs of hair over her shoulder, "But to the point, you're overthinking things. Surely you understand your heart better than anyone else."

"Ha, ha, very funny."

As she allowed Threadcutter to disappear into the depths of her heart, leaving motes of crimson light caressing her fingers, Ryuko snorted at the joke, "Seriously? That's it? There's no secret? Nothing special? I ain't gonna suddenly learn Formchanges while getting my face pounded into the ground by a psychotic asshole?"

"If you don't trust me, Ryuko, then simply trust your heart."

The lingering traces of amusement vanished from the older master's voice as she placed her remaining hand on Ryuko's shoulder, "Believe in Mako and Satsuki. Believe in those special few who've suffered the same pain you have. For even in the darkest of shadows, they shall always remain at your side. The lights guiding your heart out of the darkness."

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/8/85/ED1_GnIjI4.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-

[down/800?cb=20140717081352\]](#)

Ryuko blinked, clearing the cobwebs from her mind.

Staring at the starless darkness swirling overhead in patterns that hurt her eyes, she didn't quite find the energy to move. Spread eagle on the ground in the middle of nowhere, thick patches of waist-high grass swaying in mysteriously random bursts of wind, Ryuko wracked her mind for answers. She didn't know when it happened. Or how it happened. Or how it was even possible. Because she would have *remembered* something so unexpected happening.

Yet somehow her helmet was shattered, exposing half of her face to the darkness.

"Tch!"

Her fingers clenched the dirt, grabbing handfuls of purplish-black soil.

As the lingering remnant of her dream faded completely, leaving half-remembered memories and feelings, she forced herself off the ground. And then immediately regretted it when everything suddenly *hurt*.

"Ugh, bad idea..."

Collapsing with her back against a rock, she curled and uncurled her fingers, each motion feeling as if she punched Gamagori's granite-like abs.

"Everything *hurts*."

It still hurt to move. And by hurt, she meant feeling worse than going five rounds with Satsuki and Junketsu before overcoming her stupid embarrassment at wearing Senketsu. Which made sense. Kisaragi Nova wasn't something she could fire eight times - which she did - without suffering some form of consequence. Not even for her. Life

Fibers or not, unleashing that much power took its toll. Her ultimate badass of a Formchange was meant only for emergencies. Situations where using Threadcutter and magic and the Scissor Blades wouldn't work. Like the goddamn Grand Couturier somehow escaping hell. Or Nui Harime luring her into a trap on the outskirts of Twilight Town with several puppets resembling townsfolk.

But she didn't have any time to waste.

"Alright..."

And in the Realm of Darkness, something like 'collateral damage' didn't exist.

"... that's enough restin' on my ass."

The soreness didn't last longer than another half-minute. Again, thanks to her Life Fibers. A lot of shit about Life Fibers still didn't make sense. But thanks to her dear old mom's stupid experiments, exhaustion courtesy of eight rapid-fire Kisaragi Nova point-blank into an army of darkness's literal face lasted a little over three minutes. Or maybe longer. Because she had no idea how long she'd been unconscious. And even against Nui Harime, she'd only used one Kisaragi Nova. Not two. Plus, by the time she'd actually used it, she'd been standing on death's door, one foot in the grave and the other squarely planted up the Grand Couturier's ass.

"Now..."

By the time she finished massaging her shoulder, joints popping from her unnecessary effort at speeding up the already short process, Ryuko's mood noticeably worsened.

"How the hell did I end up here?"

Thinking back, the answer came rather quickly.

Her attempt at thinning out the Heartless with Kisaragi Nova accomplished jack shit. There had been too many. Far too many. Buying some time to think wouldn't work when another two bastards replaced the ones she destroyed. Not to mention the horde approaching over the horizon. A literal cloud of darkness. Thousands - no, millions, of Heartless. Some she'd recognized. And others she didn't.

What happened *next* was still a little confusing.

She remembered landing on the ocean. That much was clear. Threadcutter had been ready to tear the Heartless more than enough assholes to last a goddamn eternity, a simple plan until she came up with a better strategy to escape with life and heart intact.

Then, for some reason, the water turned into actual water.

And falling.

A lot of falling.

Darkness grasping at her heart.

And then a familiar, comforting light.

"*Ryuko!*"

"Shit."

Her frustration echoed against the darkness. The answer was obvious. And *knowing* it was so damn obvious loosened the iron-like vice keeping her emotions firmly under control.

She was *lost*.

Breathing in and out, hoping to calm down enough to think, she grabbed onto the rock, squeezing hard enough she was almost certain it would crack. Instead of an ocean stretching as far as the eye could see, which was pretty damn far when nothing else stood in

the way, she was somewhere completely different. Maybe a... what was the word again... savanna or something? One of those dry and hot grasslands with the tigers and lions she remembered reading about in world studies at Rinne High School. Or was it Honnouji Academy? Ten years was a shit long time. But *that* didn't matter. Because there was nothing but empty silence and lingering regrets.

And a bunch of other stuff.

Purplish-black rocks covered in glowing blue cracks, a strange dark light pulsing from within, jutted out of the ground across the strange landscape. Everywhere she looked, the natural beauty that, at one point, Mako would've wanted to visit was tarnished. Or maybe corrupted made more sense. Similar outcroppings curled through the air like vines only to disappear into hazy darkness resembling fog. Overhead, pitch-black thunderclouds tainted with purple and blue and dark red streaks of lightning, threatened rain that never quite came. Bitterly cold gusts of wind whispered snuck through her damaged visor, seeking entrance into her heart only for her light to quickly smash its face against the ground.

Her fingers twitched, trying to clench into a fist, until she forcibly stopped herself.

She knew *exactly* what this place was.

It was a world long since devoured by the darkness.

One she couldn't save from the Heartless.

"Gilgamesh!"

A sharp *snap* of her wrist summoned Threadcutter from the depths of her heart. The bitterness filling the Realm of Darkness burned her nose. It made her sick. She didn't know how or why, but the damn place smelled like rotten fruit and expired milk. The sort of mess she'd accidentally leave in the kitchen for Satsuki to find, and complain about, two weeks after she'd been working on another

world. Yet with a defiant *shove*, she pushed those thoughts to the furthest corners of her mind.

"Hey, Gilgamesh!"

There wasn't time to worry about herself. Or wonder why the Realm of Darkness smelled goddamn awful. As her voice finished echoing, repeating the bastard's name over and over until fading completely, she yanked off her helmet, which bounced along the ground before disintegrating into shards of blue light.

"OI! BASTARD!!!"

Shouting a little louder, her right eyebrow sporadically twitched.

Nobody answered.

"GET YOUR ASS OUT HERE!!!"

Based solely on past experience, she expected something to happen. Maybe the bastard leaping from behind a tree or a rock. Or better yet, walking out of a corridor of darkness. But nothing answered. Nothing happened. Nothing except the deafening sound of her failures.

"Ugh, great..."

A hiss of air whistled between clenched teeth as her entire head tilted backwards, giving her an amazing view of the thunderclouds heavy with darkness. A storm always on the brink of dropping rain and wind but never quite reaching that point.

"Stuck in the goddamn Realm of Darkness."

The urge to punch something, to punch *someone*, bubbled within her heart.

Not only was she lost who-knows-where inside the Realm of Darkness, a place she wouldn't have normally dared step foot upon,

her only ticket out of the dump was missing. Probably not dead. Maybe? She wouldn't bet on it. Gilgamesh might be a cowardly criminal, but he wasn't stupid. If she knew the moron as well as he claimed to know her, which was several different disturbing layers of perverted creepiness, he escaped moments before the Heartless decided to ruin the moment.

CRACK!!!

It was an old tree. One inflicted by disease or drought. Its branches were bare, what little leaves remained were brown and yellow.

"I'm gonna kill Gilgamesh."

Perfect for releasing pent-up frustration.

Yet even as gnarled wood splintered beneath her natural strength, shattering into too many pieces to count, sending the entire top half of the tree crashing to the ground, she pivoted on the spot, Threadcutter spinning through the darkness before coming to a sudden rest against her right shoulder. As her Keyblade's keychain jingled in a breeze that made her nose scrunch in disgust, Ryuko spat sideways. Kicking Gilgamesh's annoying ass could wait. Time might not exist in the Realm of Darkness, but it *did* everywhere else in the universe.

Everyone was depending on her to stop the Heartless.

Satsuki. Mako. Gamagori. Beatrix. Regent Cid.

People she'd met along the way and those she didn't even know.

Worlds she'd saved from darkness and those she'd tried helping only to fail inches from the finish line.

Closing her eyes, she breathed deeply. In. And out. In. And out. Over and over again.

"But before *that*..."

If one good thing came from descending too deep into the darkness for her liking, it was knowing she was on the right track. Mickey. Aqua. Their hearts were closer. She couldn't see them. Not with her eyes. But her heart knew where to go. Which direction she needed to go. And in an annoying place like the Realm of Darkness, Heartless never more than one or two minutes behind, it was good enough.

"... gotta find Mickey and Aqua!"

Even's Reports - V & VI

Even's Report V

Do Life Fibers have hearts?

My initial reaction to such a ridiculous question was abject skepticism. Perhaps they have hearts. Or perhaps I misinterpreted some of the data, biasing the results with predetermined conclusions.

Occam's razor dictates that when choosing between possible explanations for an occurrence, the one requiring fewer assumptions is usually accurate. Thus, I wondered whether my belief the parasites possessed hearts stemmed from incomplete results. Given their esoteric and alien biology, it would be presumptuous to assume they have hearts when a simpler answer was equally sufficient.

Yet multiple experiments have proven increasingly vexing.

Presuming for the sake of argument that an incredible form of biological communication accounted for Life Fibers simultaneously evolving specific adaptations, I shifted the momentary focus of my research into the parasites. But after testing and retesting, followed by recalibrations, no subsonic or supersonic reverberations have been detected. And isolated samples of the parasites within four centimeters of double-plated lead, pressured chambers contained within an absolute vacuum, proved the damned parasites do not communicate through visual, auditory, olfactory or thermal means.

Could I be missing something?

Although I no longer research the heart and darkness alongside Xehanort, Lord Ansem and my fellow apprentices, not out of concern towards their unethical behavior, which fills my heart with guilt and dread, but interest in something of far greater importance, I spend

several nights a week reviewing their latest discoveries. According to Xehanort's reports, three metaphysical 'elements' are necessary for true existence - Body, Heart and Soul. The body grants the heart and soul form. The soul animates the body, imbuing it with the willpower to prosper. And the heart controls the body. Without the heart, it's impossible for the body and soul to survive.

It is the heart which houses memories.

Memories...

Can memories exist without a heart?

Until several months ago I would have discarded such an absurd question without so much as reconsideration. Then again, until recently, thaumavores were considered nothing more than philosophical arguments. And thus, I find myself returning to Occam's razor. And though I can't remember the source, someone once told me that after eliminating the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth. Since I've proven beyond a shadow of a doubt Life Fibers transmit information through means other than biological communication, I must accept the parasites have the ability to not only form memories but share them with one another as well.

Memories and the heart are inexplicably linked.

Perhaps the parasites do possess some form of rudimentary heart.

But what kind of heart?

More research is required.

Even's Report VI

A young girl was found last week.

No older than fifteen, perhaps sixteen.

Lacking any forms of personal identification.

Dilan and Aeus discovered her lying in the Central Square Gardens during their morning patrol. Their original belief she was working with those teenagers constantly attempting to sneak into the castle, perhaps as a distraction while they found another entrance, was proven false when neither could rouse her from unconsciousness. Fully alarmed, Dilan hurried back to Hollow Bastion to inform Lord Ansem while Aeus brought the girl to Doctor Kadowaki's clinic.

What happened during the next thirty minutes is detailed in Doctor Kadowaki's report.

Medical examinations concluded no broken bones or localized contusions. Nor is there evidence of internal hemorrhaging or swelling of the brain, which would've accounted for her coma. Perhaps she suffered some form of traumatic brain injury? Maybe a stroke? Restoration magic is impressive, capable of healing debilitating injuries. But there are some things beyond magic's reach.

Lord Ansem has ordered the girl brought to the castle infirmary for continued observation.

Although I hold little interest in our unexpected guest - other than, of course, desiring a swift recovery - I understand his reasoning. Doctor Kadowaki's medical prowess is second to none. But her clinic lacks the equipment necessary for long-term patient monitoring. The infirmary is some of the best personnel on the world. All of whom would care for any patient as they would Lord Ansem.

The least we can do is keep her comfortable until Dilan and the others locate any possible family.

As well as the heinous perpetrator behind such a terrible crime.

It sounds callous, but I cannot help but note the similarities between this young teenager's appearance and Xehanort's.

If, or perhaps when, the girl regains consciousness, will she lack memories of her past as well?

At this I pause.

While I'm certain she'll be well cared for, Braig's reaction when Dilan informed Lord Ansem, him and myself of the girl's discovery was... odd.

The man's laissez-faire demeanor is infamous throughout town. But by the time I realized something was amiss, he was back to normal. Yet despite talking about our new guest as if she wasn't their problem, then claiming they have better things to do then take care of every random brat on the street, his reactions sounded almost forced.

Perhaps she's a daughter of a friend?

A niece?

I can't recall Braig having family, let alone friends. And I sincerely doubt she's his daughter because I can't fathom any woman sleeping with him. His behavior is caustic. Even on the best of days, when he does not see fit to mock my research with ill-timed jokes about living clothes and world-ending threads, I barely tolerate his whimsical nonchalance.

As I rub my temple, hints of a headache burrowing into my sleep-deprived mind, writing by the light from my computer, I wonder if I'm overthinking things.

Nevertheless, I shall endeavor to keep lenzo as far away from Braig as physically possible.

Chapter 14.4

[img:

https://66.media.tumblr.com/2c35477ffd3db45383c657853afe8e03/tumblr_oqn3dbfmoC1vlnyzco1_1280.jpg]

Until a few days ago, her record for 'number of Heartless slaughtered with one attack' hovered around one hundred.

Maybe one hundred and fifty.

She would have loved being more precise, if only to rub the knowledge into Satsuki's face, but when fighting tidal waves of darkness, grubby little claws relentlessly grasping towards her heart, there wasn't time to count each individual Heartless. Plus, with how fast they disappeared after getting sliced and diced by Threadcutter, it was goddamn difficult tracking one floating imp's disintegrating remains before another two took its place.

But that didn't matter.

"Give me a fucking break!"

What *did* matter, on the other hand, despite have no time to stop and catch her breath, was knowing her record now stood somewhere north of six or seven hundred Heartless.

"They just keep coming!"

Rocks and pebbles tumbled into the abyss as she leapt across the chasm, clearing more than three dozen meters with the same amount of effort as getting up from a chair. Furiously landing on a floating island no larger than her house, she flipped forward, pivoted clockwise and immediately vaulted to the next foothold.

And the next.

And then the one after that.

Dirt rained downwards, disappearing into the darkness, whenever she landed upon another floating boulder. Her knees flexed with every touch down. Her muscles tensed every time she landed, instantly readjusted herself and jumped further across the infinite darkness, adrenaline and oxygen fueling the intense exertion alongside her natural physiology.

And only after reaching the far side of the canyon, hundreds of meters across the darkness, did her patience *finally* snap.

Her left foot connected with the ground first. And while it slipped on the moist soil, nearly causing her leg to violently twist counterclockwise, Ryuko managed to reorient herself just as thousands upon thousands of Heartless arrived. They flew through the darkness on wings too small to carry their bodies. They sprinted and charged across the chasm in much the same way she did. Some were monstrous, others hilarious and a handful almost humanish.

Yet all of them sought only one thing and one thing only.

Vermilion light spilled from her heart like water, an unrelenting beacon against the encroaching darkness, as flames *enveloped* Threadcutter, bathing her snarling features and bared teeth within dancing shades of red, orange, yellow and blinding white.

"INFERNO RAID!!!"

Wrapped within scorching flames hot enough to temporarily blister her cheeks, Threadcutter spun towards the nearest Heartless. The puffball looked like something Mako might've drawn in art class. Its face looked stupid. The three tentacles sprouting from its spherical body looked dumb. But when Threadcutter detonated right after smashing into its face with the force of a thousand suns, taking out the Heartless and hundreds of its friends in a fiery explosion of death and flames, her satisfaction was palpable.

"Heh!"

Without even thinking about it, Threadcutter reappeared in her twitching fingers, crimson and gold light raining from its teeth, "Got ya... aw, come the hell on!"

In a messed-up dimension like the Realm of Darkness, the natural landscape - purple soil, glowing mushroom-like rocks jutting out of the ground, miniature floating islands and bitter darkness clinging to every breath - mixed with worlds long since devoured by the Heartless. It was a random mishmash shoved together like an eight-year-old got creative with their toys.

Everything flowed together.

At some point, probably during the tenth or eleventh Heartless tidal wave, she couldn't actually remember, bamboo forests and broken foothills, purplish glowing spikes dotting the terrain like a disturbing infection, replaced the savanna.

She *hated* the Heartless.

"You're really startin' to piss me off!"

There were less Heartless. Maybe a thousand of them. A fraction of their original numbers. But still more than enough to wear on her last nerve. The monsters were persistent, she'd admit that much. But she was getting sick and tired of running. Dodging and weaving between bamboo stalks, Threadcutter slicing and slashing and cutting anything that stood in her way into coaster-sized chunks that fell upon the pursuing monsters like wooden hail, Ryuko's eye twitched as that final fiber in the back of her mind *snapped*.

"Enough of this bullshit!"

With a *snap-click*, she drove one heel into the packed dirt, arresting her momentum so quickly she continued skidding several more feet.

Even surrounded by the Realm of Darkness, nose twitching from the disgusting smell permeating deep into her bones, Ryuko watched the various types of Heartless stampede through the bamboo. Crimson rippled down Threadcutter. Auburn magic twisted between her Keyblade's teeth, covering the ruby and gold weapon until only her fingers, tightly grasping the handle, were barely visible.

"TAKE THIS!!!"

The demon commanding what remained of the once impressive swarm appeared almost human.

Almost being the key word.

With bluish-black skin over visible muscles, a heart-shaped hole resembling the gouges those gigantic freaks had in the middle of their chests, bat-like wings on its back and feathery wings sticking out of its forearms, it looked dangerous. It *felt* dangerous. And it *was* dangerous. The purple flames underneath its feet weren't just for shits and giggles. The bastards were goddamn fast. They could turn invisible, create pinpoint explosions of darkness and had enough strength to maybe match Gamagori in an arm-wrestling tournament.

In that same breath, a scalloped sword thrust forward, darkness wafting from its ephemeral edge, when the Heartless closed the distance between them

"RAGHHHH!!!"

Paying little attention to the approaching weapon, Ryuko swung Threadcutter with as much force as she could muster.

And screamed.

"STOCK BREAK!!!"

The point-blank explosion of light slammed into Heartless. Crimson, orange and yellow streaks mixed alongside overwhelming white,

traces of dark blue visible if one examined close enough, cleaved through the scalloped blade. Bits and pieces of metal rained through the air, evaporating into darkness before she realized anything happened. And by the time her Keyblade was halfway through its swing, spittle flying between snarling lips, each and every Heartless simultaneously *disintegrated* in a crimson supernova visible over the horizon.

It was bright enough that Ryuko winced, one eye closed and half of her mouth twisted into a pained grimace.

Her ears popped when the air rushed outwards, stopped and violently refilled the temporarily vacuum faster than the speed of sound. Her hair whipped back and forth, caught within a maelstrom of light and magic. Her shoulders tensed from the backlash. Her vision darkened, exhaustion from countless hours running from, and fighting, Heartless finally beginning to take its toll. But as the dust settled and the ambience dimmed back to something around normal darkness, she slouched forward, Threadcutter slamming into the steaming ground with a solid *thunk*.

"Heh..."

Dragging bitter and disgustingly stale air into her lungs, Ryuko grinned with some measure of personal satisfaction at the burnt landscape stretching before her eyes, "Not so confident now, are you?"

Nobody answered.

But that was the point.

Nobody answered.

The Heartless were gone, reduced to darkness and shadow under the awesome power of her heart. Yet she wasn't out of the woods. Not by a long shot. As long as she was stranded inside the Realm of Darkness, more Heartless would eventually come. Threadcutter, and

by extension her heart, was like catnip to the Heartless. The bastards would eventually track her down. And so, for what felt like a long time, she held Threadcutter at the ready, waiting for any last-second surprises or the other shoe to potentially drop. But absolutely nothing happened.

And then even more nothing happened.

By the time a lot more boring nothingness wormed its way into her heart, Ryuko felt moderately confident the Heartless weren't planning on immediately stabbing her in the back.

"Ugh..."

A tired groan passed escaped Ryuko's lips as she stabbed Threadcutter into the stand before collapsing onto the nearest rock. It wasn't comfortable. With sharp and jagged edges, it looked nothing like a chair. But after wandering aimlessly through the darkness for what felt like days, fighting swarms of Heartless while moving closer and closer to Aqua and Mickey without really knowing which direction she was going, it was the next best thing.

"My feet are killing me."

Water lapped against her boots.

And suddenly, her annoyance evaporated into the darkness.

Thanks to the Heartless gunning for her fricking heart, she hadn't originally noticed *where*, exactly, she'd ended up. She'd been too busy fighting for survival against creatures capable of tearing everything apart. But sitting on the rock in the middle of a grassy clearing, inches from the edge of a small pond, algae and lily pads floating on the surface, seemingly frozen in time at the exact moment shadows consumed its world, everything suddenly felt... far away.

Her fingers twitched.

"Another world I couldn't save."

It was smaller than her palm. Smooth. Weathered. Speckled off-grey with flakes of brown and black.

"I wonder if they know I'm here?"

Sand slowly drizzled between her fingers as she picked up the stone.

"I mean, our hearts are connected."

She flicked her wrist.

"So, if I know they're here, that's gonna mean they know I'm here."

Her eyes tracked the stone, watching it skip more than ten times before vanishing below the surface.

"They're probably worried."

Tossing and catching another stone without looking away from the pond, sand randomly dripping through the air, Ryuko spontaneously clenched it between her fingers before lobbing it straight into the pond.

"No point cryin' about it."

A somber yet determined glower spread across her face as she pushed herself back onto her feet, one hand reaching out and yanking Threadcutter out of the sand. Sitting on her ass and thinking about her problems never solved anything. It only made her feel angry. She had a job to do. A door to close. Worlds to protect from darkness and psychotic assholes and bitches who thought they were 'strong enough' to control the Heartless without losing their hearts.

Like that *ever* worked.

"Just gotta keep moving forward."

That was her only option - march forth deeper into the darkness. She didn't know *where* or *when* she left the last world and stumbled into this one. It could have been hours ago. Or even days. And the harder she thought about it, the more things turned into a kaleidoscopic blur. There had been caves, an underground lake surrounding an empty pedestal, maybe a castle or two, a destroyed cityscape and what looked like a medieval town. But this place looked brand-fricking-different.

Beyond the bamboo stalks ending in jagged purple leaves and disgusting bluish-black flower-like tumors, past the shadowy mist clinging to the ground like fog, loomed a valley covered with bottomless crevasses, thorn-like rocks and random eruptions of darkness.

Up above, the thunderstorm was now a dark haze, patches of purple, blue and maroon mixing together like someone obnoxiously threw buckets of paint onto an easel.

"Why the hell does darkness smell like wet dog?"

Doing her best not to dwell on the awful smell that made her want to take several showers, Ryuko rubbed her neck, fingers digging into corded muscles, "Ugh, forget it."

Everybody claimed time didn't exist in the Realm of Darkness. But if that was true, why was she tired? And hungry? Well, not hungry anymore. But that didn't change the point. How was exhaustion any different than being tired? Was there a difference? Who could possibly know the answer to such a question? Well, Satsuki would probably know. And then drone on and on for ten minutes about how, as a famous and well-respected Keyblade Master, she should already know something so goddamn trivial.

Just imagining a speech that boring made her want to take a nap.

"Let my heart be my guiding key."

Taking another deep breath, holding it, then exhaling, she focused on the pinpricks of light in the darkness. Mickey and Aqua were closer. And farther away. Even after bulldozing her way through countless Heartless, moving from one destroyed world to another, it felt like she'd only moved a couple of feet in the right direction. It didn't make sense in her head. It didn't make any more sense the longer she thought about it. But it made sense to her heart. And that was pretty much the only thing that mattered.

"But which way to go?"

That was the million gil question.

"Eh, screw it!"

Punching one fist into her other palm, she shoved those thoughts to the furthest depths of her mind, "I'll just follow my heart until -"

Darkness exploded out of the pond before the words finished leaving her lips.

"The hell's going on!?"

Instinctively flexing her knees, toes curling inside her boots, Ryuko threw herself backwards. In a single bound, accompanied by vermilion light caressing her battle-scarred armor and Keyblade like waves crashing upon sandy shores, she landed across the clearing. She hadn't the slightest clue what was happening. And inside a messed-up dimension like the Realm of Darkness where time was another word and shadows taunted her heart, not to mention the Heartless popping out of the ground left and right, that made everything one thousand times worse.

Something was coming.

Its stench clung to the air, filling her nose and heart with its obnoxious and disgusting odor.

A smell that made her want to gag, throw up and punch someone's face inside-out.

"Tch!"

Golden-ruby light twinkling around Threadcutter as her tongue clicked against the roof of her mouth.

"Come on, already!"

Even to her, *taunting* the darkness was goddamn stupid.

"You plannin' something or what!?"

But when nothing happened, not even a Heartless or two jumping out of the flames, she could afford being a little frustrated.

"Ugh, I don't have time for this -"

As if deciding now, of all possible times, was the perfect moment to screw with her head, the darkness froze in place. Standing at what she felt was a safe distance from the mysterious flames, Ryuko waited for the next shoe to drop, cerulean light clinging to Threadcutter's teeth. The instant something popped out of the flames, even a lowly shadow, she was going to blast it with everything. No holding back. Not in a place like the Realm of Darkness. Not when she had people counting on her to close the Door to Darkness and come back.

"Huh?"

She blinked once, then twice, when the sickly greenish-purple flames abruptly peeled away.

"Is that... a mirror?"

The question was pointless because it *was*, in fact, a mirror floating above the pond.

"Am I missing something here?"

It took her a few seconds to realize she wasn't going nuts from being stranded in the darkness too long. It really was a mirror. A fancy, full-length silver mirror surrounded by gold and white trimming. One suspiciously similar to the mirror standing in the far corner of her old room at Alexandria Castle. As the cerulean light surrounding Threadcutter faded alongside her anxiety and frustration, her snarl only deepened. Philosophy might not be her strong suit, but it didn't take a genius to realize a mirror appearing out of nowhere, especially inside the Realm of Darkness, was seriously bad news.

"So, what's your deal?"

Ryuko allowed herself to ask the question, knowing there was nobody apart from herself around to answer.

Even standing as far away from the mirror as physically possible without disappearing into the forest, she could see her reflection. The Ryuko Matoi reflected on the polished surface perfectly mimicked her bewilderment and frustration. Every strand of sweaty hair identical. Her eyes were the same color. Raising her right arm caused her reflected doppelganger's left arm to do the same. Tilting her head one way caused her reflection to tilt its head in the opposite fashion.

For all intents and purposes, despite raising countless alarms inside her heart, it was nothing more than an ordinary mirror.

"Oh, I *get* it."

Folding one arm over the other, Ryuko stared at her equally pissed-off reflection.

"Yeah, it makes perfect sense."

It was so goddamn obvious even Mako wouldn't have fallen for it.

Well, *maybe*.

Mako would've definitely realized something was up.

And then fallen straight into the trap.

"Nice try, but I ain't that stupid."

She laughed. A barking snort echoed across the clearing as her lips twisted into a snark-filled grin. Darkness thrived on insecurities and doubts. As one's heart sank deeper into despair or anger, the tighter its stranglehold grew. Until, eventually, it consumed your heart. Which meant this was some sort of dastardly yet cunning psychological trap. It had to be. There was no other reason why the mirror resembled the one from her old room. Or the intense feeling of déjà vu inside her heart. Heh, the darkness probably expected her to walk forward and touch the mirror like a naïve moron. At which point, ninety-nine out of one hundred times, her reflection would suddenly come to life, pull itself out of the mirror, prattle on and on about how she's a terrible monster who doesn't deserve to play 'make-believe human' and a bunch of other bullshit nonsense.

Driving her heel into the ground while spinning around, Threadcutter bouncing against her shoulder, she flipped off her reflection, just to further drive home how little she cared.

"Better luck next -"

Ryuko not so much heard or saw but *felt* something change.

It was impossible to describe, let alone explain.

Facing away from the strange mirror, staring through the bamboo thicket in the direction she *knew* led straight to Aqua and Mickey, an unfamiliar feeling beyond déjà vu grasped her heart. She couldn't breathe. A thick lump grew in the back of her throat. Threadcutter trembled when her fingers tightened around its hilt, causing the Keyblade to subtly shift down her shoulder. A single dollop of sweat

dribbled down her cheek, reflecting what little light penetrated the darkness, before splashing against her breastplate.

And when she finally turned around, twisting so quickly her hair whipped in the wind, Ryuko's mouth open and closed several times, her heart unable to make sense of what her eyes were seeing.

"... the hell?"

Caught within the darkness enveloping the mutated thicket, the mirror still floated above the pond. Nothing about the mirror looked any different.

But instead of her own face... instead of the face she'd woken up every morning seeing in the bathroom mirror... someone else stared back.

["Nui Harime!?"](#)

Chapter 14.5

Ryuko not so much heard or saw but *felt* something change.

It was impossible to describe, let alone explain.

Facing away from the strange mirror, staring through the bamboo thicket in the direction she *knew* led straight to Aqua and Mickey, an unfamiliar feeling beyond déjà vu grasped her heart. She couldn't breathe. A thick lump grew in the back of her throat. Threadcutter trembled when her fingers tightened around its hilt, causing the Keyblade to subtly shift down her shoulder. A single dollop of sweat dribbled down her cheek, reflecting what little light penetrated the darkness, before splashing against her breastplate.

And when she finally turned around, twisting so quickly her hair whipped in the wind, Ryuko's mouth open and closed several times, her heart unable to make sense of what her eyes were seeing.

"... the hell?"

Shadowed by the darkness, the mirror remained floating above the tranquil pond.

Nothing about *it* looked different.

"Nui... Harime!?"

Instead of her own face... instead of the face she'd had for more than twenty-eight years... Nui Harime stared back. And immediately every nerve in her body was on fire. Sweat colder than ice trickled down her spine. Conscious thoughts departed as primal instinct took control. Impossible! This was impossible! How was the bitch alive? She'd watched Nui disintegrate into Life Fibers! She'd cut off the bitch's fricking head! And then sliced and diced whatever few Life Fibers remained with the Scissor Blades for good measure!

"SHIT! SHIT! SHIT!!!"

It had to be done. There was no other way to do this. Not without taking a few risks.

Preparing herself for the absolute worst, Ryuko dismissed her Keyblade Armor. The magical protection vanished in a flourish of dark blue light, returning to the gauntlet covering her lower left arm. The bitterness was stronger. And more disgusting. Like that wet dog rolled around in something nasty, took a nap and decided to sit on her face for several hours. But she didn't feel different. Her heart felt fine. Better than fine. It didn't make sense. But there wasn't time to think about what it didn't make any sense.

Because she had shit to deal with.

Her toes curled inside their now-wet sneakers as she pivoted upon the marshy ground.

Shifting her center of mass forward, Ryuko grabbed one of the Scissor Blades dangling around her neck. Hanging upon a lustrous mithril necklace Mako thought looked super adorable but was fricking expensive, thousands of Gil more expensive than it had any right to be, the miniaturized crimson weapon extended to full-size before her sneakers finished stomping against the wet dirt.

In the blink of an eye, almost too slow against someone like the psychotic bitch, the Scissor Blade and Threadcutter settled into her left and right hands respectively.

But there was nobody there.

"Huh?"

A loud droning pressed against her ears as she looked around the darkened glade, searching for any signs of Nui Harime.

"What the..."

An annoying thought whispered in the back of her mind.

"Wait a second..."

Looking over her shoulder at the mirror showing Nui Harime, then back around, then back at the mirror, then back around one final time, her mouth opened and closed several times until she resisted the powerful desire to smash her forehead against the nearest tree.

"Of all the..."

A twitch developed along the right side of her face.

"... how fricking DUMB am I!?"

It was an important question that didn't need answering. Because she already *knew* the goddamn answer. Every word of it. She was stupid. No, she was far beyond stupid, kilometers down the road and across several worlds. She wanted nothing more than to slap herself. Then slap herself again. Then find Satsuki, Mako, Gamagori, apologize for jumping head-first into the Realm of Darkness, and have them slap her across the face.

"Ugh..."

Threadcutter unceremoniously returned to the depths of her heart in a rather muted outpouring of gold and crimson stars.

"I'm a goddamn idiot."

As quickly as the conflicting emotions swelled within her chest, the begrudging anticipation of killing Nui Harime for a third and hopefully final time gave way to exasperation. Pinching the bridge of her nose, Ryuko wished she was somewhere - anywhere - other than where she was currently standing. If only to bury the embarrassment at being so goddamn stupid.

"Very funny."

It was so funny she forgot to laugh. Sarcasm oozed from her heart as she turned around and completely faced the mirror. Water lapped against her sneakers. The Scissor Blade shifted from her left to right hands as the former slowly moved. In a rather awkward fashion, she raised her left arm, waving to herself, watching as the blonde sociopath with a body count higher than most people could count copied the movement. She clenched her fingers, curling them into a fist, before giving herself the finger. And with a not-so-insignificant amount of personal satisfaction, dryly chuckled.

"Oh, ha. Ha. Ha."

She rolled her eyes so hard they almost fell out of her head.

"Ain't that an ugly-ass face I could've died without seeing again."

Wasn't that the godawful truth? Nui Harime replacing her reflection sucked ass. And maybe it suggested she still had more than a couple of personal issues to work through. Stuff to talk about with Satsuki and Mako after saving the universe. But that's all it really was - a fake reflection in the mirror. A trick. An illusion. A nightmare plucked from her memories by the darkness. But so fucking what? No matter what anyone said, she and Nui had nothing in common! Except for the Life Fibers stuffed inside their bodies. But that wasn't by choice!

"Tch!"

Her tongue clicked against the roof of her mouth. If there was any - *any* - consolation prize for being stuck in the Realm of Darkness, at least Satsuki wasn't around to watch her make an ass of herself. Maybe Satsuki would understand. She was probably the only person who *could* understand. But that didn't mean she wanted anyone, especially her sis, sharing her personal embarrassment.

"Cccrrraaappp..."

Drawling out her frustration, she glared at the reflection. God, she hated that face. If she didn't know something obvious would happen, she'd march straight over and shove her fist through Nui's goddamn

-

"Huh?"

Something about the bitch's eyes looked familiar.

"Ugh, really?"

Almost chucking the Scissor Blade through the mirror out of principle, stopping herself only because she knew she'd somehow lose it, Ryuko bit the inside of her cheek.

"Sure, Nui and me are the same!"

In any other circumstance she'd be too busy transforming Nui's face into a bloody smear across her knuckles. But standing on the shore of the pond, water lapping at her sneakers, it was impossible to not notice how much the Grand Couturier's eyes were just like hers, right down to the gear-shaped patterns and particular shade of blue.

"And why stop there? Maybe I'll start wearing in a pink dress and spend every waking moment talking about clothes!"

The annoyance dripped from her tongue like thick ichor. If this stupid-as-hell place thought replacing her reflection with Nui Harime was enough to weaken her heart, it was going to have to try a lot harder than this. She'd been through too much shit, experienced batcrap insanity ninety-nine percent of people only dreamt about. Until she destroyed him, everyone claimed Ardyn Izunia was an unstoppable monster. The greatest threat to the Realm of Light. A plague of darkness capable of singlehandedly extinguishing every last time throughout the worlds.

But those people didn't know anything about Ragyo Kiryuin.

"Screw that!"

And she intended to keep it that way.

"I've got more important shit to do!"

Paying absolutely no attention to how the Scissor Blade in the mirror appeared a familiar shade of dark purple, she snorted, "Now, for the last time, take that Scissor Blade, bend over and shove it straight up your -"

"Bum-bum-bum bum-bah-bum-bum..."

The humming sucked the warmth from her bones.

"... no way..."

A single bead of sweat slowly trickled down her cheek. Glistening wetly against her skin, it pooled against the bottom of her chin, hanging for the briefest of moments before dripping onto her shirt. That upbeat series of familiar notes. The slight pause and sharp intake before the second verse. She'd recognize it in her sleep. It was the Lindblum royal anthem. And hearing something so positive and warm coming from someone who was dead - who should be *goddamn* dead - stopped her dead in her tracks.

KA-THUNK!!!

Crimson darkness danced upon the Scissor Blade as hardened Life Fibers unraveled and restitched themselves. As the grooved handle swung outward, caught midmotion by her other hand, Ryuko accepted the familiar weight Decapitation Mode.

"NUI!!! HARIME!!!"

Even pissed off and on the verge of turning a large chunk of this fragmented world into a smoking wasteland, she wasn't blind. She could see the truth. Her heart screamed at an ear-deafening volume to ignore the illusion staring her in the face. And she listened. Loud

and clear. Nui Harime was dead. She killed the bitch with her own hands. Sliced and diced more than her fair share of Life Fibers into glowing confetti. The humming was probably nothing more than the darkness manipulating her own memories of the royal anthem in some sick form of psychological torture.

But she knew better than to assume anything about Nui Harime.

The bitch survived *decapitation*, which wasn't the goddamn surprising part.

No.

What stopped her from accepting this *wasn't* Nui Harime was remembering how the cocky little bitch somehow found a Keyblade. An actual Keyblade. Not some second-hand faked copy. A real Keyblade. A purplish-pink version of Threadcutter. Which was impossible because *nobody* - not her or Satsuki or even Mako - could find a Keyblade off the street.

"THE HELL YOU DOIN' HERE!?"

Simply *swinging* the Scissor Blade didn't do it justice. She *grasped* the weapon hard enough that her knuckles popped. A trickle of blood trailed from the corners of her lip as a single incisor penetrated skin and flesh. Feathery hair rustled in the chaotic breeze as her upper body twisted counterclockwise, crimson energy trailing in the hardened Life Fiber weapon's wake. As Nui's reflection remained unmoving in the mirror, lips curling into an all-knowing and mocking smile, Ryuko twisted her wrists, muscles tightening and stiffening in the bright darkness.

"SEN'I -"

In the blink of an eye, a single beat of her raging heart, she was no longer standing in the glade.

And the Scissor Blade shattered into infinite shards of ruby light.

" - SOSHITSU!?"

Physics was a massive bitch. By now she understood that. Even with magic tossed into the equation for shits and giggles, there were a few immutable rules. Like momentum. Without the Scissor Blade functioning as a counterbalance, she stumbled forward. Caught off-balance by the sudden change of scenery... and the lack of a sword in her hands... Ryuko's attempts at arresting her momentum only succeeded in making things worse. Her arms spun in awkward circles. One foot crossed over the other. And soon enough, thanks to stepping on one of her shoelaces, she experienced the intimate introduction of her face to the ground.

"... give me a fricking break."

It didn't hurt *physically*.

Her pride, on the other hand, was an entirely different question.

As she fell flat on her ass, Ryuko decided to accept what happened with dignity and grace. Which lasted roughly ten seconds before her fist pounded against the glass, sending waves rippling through the surrounding darkness.

"UGH!!!"

Laying on her back, arms spread out and strands of dual colored hair lightly fluttering against her eyes and nose, Ryuko groaned.

"I hate this place."

For what felt like hours, unwilling to move a muscle, out of laziness or embarrassment or something else, she didn't do anything besides stare silently into the darkness. She breathed through her nose, in and out and in and out, before deciding enough was enough. If experience meant anything, that cloak-wearing bastard was somewhere nearby, probably invisible and waiting for her to lower her guard. He'd then spew some cryptic nonsense about doors and

keys and following her heart before vanishing. Just like last time. Just like every time.

"... I'm going to kick him in the balls."

If the bastard was a figment of her imagination, threatening to kick herself in the balls probably counted as self-harm. But rolling onto her stomach before lazily picking herself off the ground, stopping only to tie her sneakers, Ryuko found herself caring about something far more important.

"Of course."

Her eyebrow twitched as a humorless grin pulled upon the corners of her mouth, "Why would it be anything else?"

It seemed like every time she dove into her own heart, the figures formed out of stained-glass changed. Last time it had been Senketsu and Nui Harime. This time Nui was still curled along one side of the platform, sleeping with a content expression and a faint smile. But instead of the ugly-as-hell pink dress, the psychotic bitch wore something relatively appropriate and normal. Which made the other person - herself, right down to the messy, unkempt hair and frown - all the more annoying.

She and Nui were sleeping side-by-side.

In her right hand was Threadcutter. In Nui's left hand stood that purplish-pink Keyblade bearing more than a faint resemblance to Threadcutter. The two Keyblades were crossed over each other, painted light and darkness drawing her attention to a dusty, familiar landscape illuminated by a heart-shaped moon.

"The longer you wait, the more life will pass you by."

Her breath hitched at the echoing voice.

"Pretending everything's fine and dandy only goes so far, eventually you'll have to make a choice."

It came from everywhere and nowhere.

"An important choice."

Her sneakers squeaked against the glass as she spun around, eyes swiveling back and forth.

"One with really important consequences."

There was no mistaking *who* was talking.

"Because you can't keep dreaming *forever*."

"Nice try, dipshit!"

She couldn't see the bastard. But that didn't mean he wasn't out there. No matter how many times her eyes swept the thick darkness, tracking faint ripples caused by the multicolored glass underneath her worn sneakers, she clenched and unclenched her knuckles, each motion proceeded by several *cracks*. This was her goddamn heart. This station and the darkness represented the sum total of her existence. Even if Nui hadn't been sliced and diced until nothing, not even scraps of Life Fibers, remained, she couldn't be here. Which left only one irritating suspect.

"But you ain't Nui Harime!"

A soft wind brushed against her face as she marched toward the center of the platform, "So drop the act and come out!"

"But I'm right here, Ryuko."

The affable, faux friendly voice whispered straight into her ear, **"I've *always* been here."**

Ryuko kicked backwards, driving her sneaker straight through where she knew Nui Harime, or whoever was mimicking the bitch's voice, was standing. But they weren't there. And as her right foot passed through nothing but emptiness, she used her momentum to spin completely around. She followed the faint laughter, which grated against her ears like fingernails on a chalkboard.

But no matter where she looked, she was completely alone.

"God damn it!"

Vermilion light erupted around her fingers as Threadcutter materialized mid-swing. This was bullshit! If this was really her heart, it should be impossible for anyone, especially a bitch like Nui Harime or that cloaked asshole, from hiding, "Where the hell are you!?"

"Right where I've always been."

This time, she leapt forward, flipping midair and landing on the stained-glass near the edge of the station, sneakers sliding against the surface.

"Behind you, of course."

"Finally decided to show your face, huh?"

Biting the inside of her cheek, tongue scrapping against her teeth, Ryuko shifted one foot sideways. Her fingers slid down Threadcutter's handle, settling in a tighter, far less restrictive grip. There was something *off* about Nui. And it took her less than a second to realize what. Just like that screwed-up mirror, the bitch's eyes were identical to her own. Bright sapphire ringed by gear-shaped spokes. Shaking her head at the disturbing thought, her attention drifted from Nui's sly, almost guilty smirk to the blonde drill-like pigtails now settling against her back as golden waves to the Grand Couturier's white shirt, blue jeans and pink and black sneakers.

If not for the pinkish-purple Keyblade clasped in her left hand, one so similar to Threadcutter, Nui would've looked completely *normal*.

"You can play human all you want, Ryuko."

The illusion wearing Nui Harime's face and voice slowly raised its Keyblade.

"... but deep down, underneath all that stupid, useless humanity..."

Word by word, syllable by syllable, inch by agonizing inch, the Grand Couturier's grin widened into something utterly monstrous, **"... you're no different than me. It's about time you accepted that."**

"THE HELL'S THAT MEAN!?"

Her sneakers squeaked against stained-glass. Adrenaline pumped through her veins. Magic caressed her heart. And in a flurry of speed, bolstered by her own resolve, determination and annoyance, Ryuko darted forward, running head-first into the pulsing, obnoxious darkness, Threadcutter aimed straight at the Grand Couturier, only to run head-first into a raging maelstrom of darkness.

"I'M SICK AND TIRED..."

As fast as it healed, the darkness burned her skin. It made every breath painful and excruciating. But furiously gnashing her teeth, spittle dribbling down her chin alongside trickles of crimson, she forced her way through the shadowy maelstrom. Every two steps closer was followed by one step backwards. She couldn't see anything. She couldn't hear anything. But she could see Nui Harime. The psychotic bitch was standing in the epicenter, smiling bright as the midday sun. And lurching closer and closer, Threadcutter offering some measure of protection against the darkness pushing her towards the edge of the platform, Ryuko *screamed*.

"... OF CRYPTIC BULLSHIT!!!"

"Don't give up, Ryuko!"

Her eyes widened.

Nui's laughter echoed in the deepest, darkest depths of her heart.

Gravity inverted herself.

And she found herself falling over the edge into the pitch-black darkness.

"Ryuko!!!"

"SENKETSU!!!"

"Senketsu?"

The unexpected voice immediately shattered whatever cobwebs constrained her heart to the murky depths of unconsciousness.

"Crap!"

A gasp left her slightly parted lips. Followed by a surprised grunt and multiple, vulgar curses. The starry skies blurred into fields of tall amber grass. One sneaker crunched dead flowers as she lurched off the ground, Threadcutter aimed at the figure sitting on a nearby log, half-rotten in the last moments of its world's existence, "Who the hell are you!?"

"Me?"

The man, she was about fifty percent certain they were a man, chuckled, "... I'm nobody. A man of little consequence in the grand scheme of things."

"Huh."

A piece of grass, brambles hanging off the stalk, stuck out of Ryuko's hair at an awkward angle. Who the hell was this guy? Already the

memories of what happened inside her heart were fading. She could barely remember talking to someone. And a presence? Senketsu? Why the hell did she shout Senketsu's name? As hard as she tried holding onto them, the memories vanished, slipping between her fingers like water.

"Hey..."

Pulling the grass out of her hair, she glanced down... up... and several other directions, "Nice clothes."

Sarcasm dripped from her voice as she tried getting a good look at the guy. Try being the key word. Because thanks to those layers upon layers of patterns, scarves, fabrics and other back-shelf, bargain-bin clothing, she couldn't see anything more than his eyes and hands. His outfit gave her a headache. It was like looking into a kaleidoscope. All those beads, chains and tassels hanging from his robes. That helmet with a single horn and bouquet of ugly-looking feathers. And those funny shoes. If Nui Harime wasn't burning in hell, the bitch would probably slaughter this guy for his goddamn terrible fashion sense.

"They serve their purpose."

She decided to let that comment slide.

"So, I'm guessing you saved me or something?"

"Hmm..."

The figure hummed.

"Well?"

"It's been ages since I've encountered another from the Realm of Light. Years. Perhaps centuries. For so long I thought I was the only one trapped in this light-forsaken realm," reaching into his robes, the

man - or perhaps large woman - extracted an intimately familiar blade, "Is this yours?"

"Yeah, it's mine."

Accepting the Scissor Blade from the guy, or woman, with a small amount of deserved suspicion, Ryuko looked over the hardened Life Fiber weapon before realizing the person was waiting for something, "Thanks. So... you got a name or something?"

"A name?"

The figure stroked their chin, shadowed eyes narrowing, "Hmm. It's been years since I've used it. But I do believe it was... Gogo."

"Gogo?"

"That's right."

"... really?"

Ryuko stared at the man... err, Gogo... for several long, awkward seconds. He'd been here for years? Centuries? Shit, his heart must be powerful to withstand the darkness. Or perhaps those clownish robes and patterns are more than for show. Maybe they afford the same protection to darkness as her Keyblade Armor. But that was a question for another time. Like when she was out of the Realm of Darkness.

"Anyway, thanks for the assist, but I gotta get going."

"Going?"

"Yeah, there's something I gotta do."

Several rapid-fire metallic *clanks* accompanied the Scissor Blade miniaturizing to carry size, something that intrigued Gogo as she hooked it back on her necklace, "When I'm done, I'll come back for you. Nobody deserves to be trapped in this stupid place."

"Interesting."

The somber moment lay scattered across the ground, broken into thousands of pieces, when Gogo chuckled.

"What?"

"Hmm? Oh, nothing."

Pushing himself off the dead log, tassels and beads jingling in the breeze, "Then I guess that means that I shall go with you as well. After all, if one deigns to travel through a nightmarish realm besieged by monstrosities and aberrations, they should have someone familiar with the terrain as their guide, wouldn't you agree?"

"Really?"

Ryuko stared at Gogo, "It's gonna be tough. Not just Heartless. But swarms of the bastards. Plus a bunch of other surprises. You're better off staying put until I get back."

"Heh..."

She couldn't see a damn thing as Gogo walked past her, but Ryuko swore he was smiling underneath that scarf.

"Then this should be fun."

Gogo

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Re:Mind [Arendelle: Première]

I'll have you know I planned on this side-story's name before the latest trailer dropped. Which was a lot more anime than I expected. In any case, you might remember Inumuta mentioning an incident on Arendelle involving Ryuko and Gilgamesh that left Satsuki annoyed and embarrassed. Well...

Oh, and this takes place six years before Kingdom Hearts, for those of you confused.

[img:

https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/disney/images/0/00/Arendelle_castle.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/1024?cb=20131010202714]

Re:Mind [Arendelle: Première]

"Really appreciate you tagging along."

It should've been hotter.

That was the only thought circulating through Ryuko's heart. It was August. She should've been sweating. And thirsty. The late afternoon sun hovered over the cliffs beyond the castle cast lengthening shadows across the valley. But the breeze wafting off the fjord sent shivers down her arms. It made everything feel like late fall. Or spring. Or San Fransokyo between February and November.

"Honestly didn't think you'd come."

Her sneakers *tap-tapped* against cobblestone stones arranged into winding streets. The town itself wasn't much. Just a few dozen houses, shops and farms built onto a hill overlooking a fjord underneath some impressive cliffs. Nothing compared to Lindblum or Alexandria. But appearances weren't everything. She knew that

better than anyone. If the townspeople were happy and content, who was she to judge?

"Especially since you were busy catching up with Inumuta."

Wearing a dark blue jacket, gold dragon-like details stitched into the sleeves, over a somewhat loose-fitting black shirt and mithril necklace, she finally turned aside, grumbling at her companion's purposeful silence, "But did you have to be so damn accommodating?"

Ryuko Matoi - Age 23

Keyblade Master

"Would you have preferred an argument?"

"No! Well... yes? Maybe. I don't know. Just something more than 'sure, let's go!'"

"Hmm..."

Not every world possessed technological marvels far beyond anything she would have thought impossible. Some worlds resembled fairy tales. Some stood close to the darkness. And others the light. And some existed in a peculiar form of quasi-parallel reality, important figures and events similar yet different occurring simultaneously with one another.

"Now then..."

Satsuki's expression subtly hardened, "... why are we here?"

"Do ya have to sound so stuck-up about it?"

"It was a simple question."

"Not coming from you, it ain't."

Ryuko should've been angry at Satsuki. Or at the very least, a little annoyed. But when a kid, no older than four or five, asked his mom about the 'funny-looking' woman with caterpillars on her face, she laughed. When everything was normal and boring, anything out of the ordinary because extraordinary. It was true on Alexandria. And it was true here. Grinning from ear to ear as a faint blush spread across the emotionless' Satsuki Kiryuin's face, she would've continued laughing if not for an elbow suddenly planting itself between her ribs.

"Ow!"

"Is something wrong, Ryuko?"

"God damn - ugh, I *really* hate you."

"Now what did Yen Sid say?"

Random people were beginning to watch them, including the kid who spoke the truth about how enormous Satsuki's eyebrows really were. But she couldn't stay pissed off at Satsuki forever. Well, she *could*. Her current record was several months. But she wasn't a punk drifting from school to school. She was almost twenty-four years old. A Keyblade Master. Even if she wanted to give Satsuki a piece of her mind for sucker-punching her in the ribs without provocation, Ryuko bit her tongue, "Something about a heart possessing a 'deep connection to winter.' Asked me to check it out. Ugh! Did you have to hit me in the goddamn ribs?"

"A deep connection to winter?"

Luxurious black hair, resting below her shoulder blades, halfway between her former haircut and where it previously stood, framed Satsuki's furrowed brows, "Was that all?"

"Pretty much."

Annoyed resignation dripped from Ryuko's heart as they walked into the central marketplace, people and merchants filling the streets nearly to capacity, "The stars ain't exactly good with small details. Like names. Or directions. Or appearances. Just cryptic riddles. And *maybe* the occasional smoky image."

"Hmm..."

"What?"

"It's only a theory but..."

"... but what? C'mon, spill it already!"

The background noises and conversations faded as Satsuki's steel blue eyes narrowed, "... but taking Yen Sid's peculiar phrasing at face value, we might be dealing with someone well-versed with magic. Perhaps a mage. Or wizard. Or even a sorceress."

"Aw, shit."

Ryuko cursed. Not particularly loud. Just enough for an older woman to cover her son's ears while shooting disappointed glares, "Great. Just what we needed. Another stuck-up bitch like Maleficent ruining our day."

An oversized yet tapering eyebrow quirked.

"You sound surprised."

"I'm *not*."

A horse neighed down the street as she reached into her pocket, grabbed several silver and bronze coins, tossed them onto a counter and reached into the straw basket full of yellow-green lemons. She didn't bother counting how much money she handed the merchant. Or noticed his eyes widen when she told him to keep the change, which was more than eleven times his weekly profit. But as he

thanked her over and over again for her 'gratuitous generosity,' she tossed all but one of the half-dozen lemons into her pocket.

"Want one?"

"No thanks."

"Whatever, suit yourself."

Her sharpened teeth tore through the yellowish-green rind, spilling juice down her chin, and making her next words nothing more than seemingly incoherent mumbles, "But as I was saying, there's gotta be more to this, ya know?"

"More?"

Ignoring the smell of manure accompanying the horse-drawn wagon passing through the marketplace, Satsuki repeated her question, "Such as?"

"Where's the doom and gloom?"

The question sounded trivial and pointless. But to them - and especially her - sometimes the ordinary was completely out of the ordinary. It was a fact of life. It was a relief knowing these people were happy. She breathed easier knowing the Heartless haven't yet reached this world. But tearing away another chunk of sour pulp, leaving but a small rind as evidence of her appetite, Ryuko looked back and forth, "Where's the ominous tower, evil-as-shit forest and overall sense of dread? I ain't saying you're wrong. But if there's another Maleficent cooped up nearby, she's doing a damn good job keeping a low profile."

"You may have a point."

Plastic *clacked* against cobblestone, matching the rhythm of Satsuki's heeled boots, as the distinctive scent of saltwater and mist

strengthened, filling her nostrils, "Or perhaps we're not dealing with a sorceress in the first place."

"Huh..."

Tossing the scraps of lemon rind into the foamy waters lapping at the shores, Ryuko's eyes craned upwards, then slowly drifted towards the ground, "Well. That settles it. Guess we gotta talk to the people in charge."

"That might work."

A shiver caressed Satsuki's heart when the southwestern wind abruptly gusted, splashing water over the abutments and staining mossy cobblestone, "But how do you intend on -"

"And that's where you come in."

Ryuko slapped Satsuki on the back, an almost mischievous smirk stretching across her face, "Complain and bitch all you want about 'realizing the errors of your way' but you goddamn ooze nobility, *Lady* Satsuki. Compared to the shit we dealt with back home, getting info from these people should be a piece of cake. Especially for the former head bitch of Honnouji Academy."

"Your confidence is reassuring, Ryuko."

Sighing at the flagrantly misguided characterization, Satsuki sarcastically quipped, "Was this your plan from the beginning?"

"Pretty much."

Another breeze erupted down the fjord, causing her shortened hair to sway and rustle against her face, "Receiving an audience will take some time."

"Eh, I have a few days to spare."

"You won't speak unless specifically addressed?"

"Nope."

"Can you present yourself respectably?"

"... more or less."

"You'll follow my lead, wherever it may go?"

"Oh, for the love of -

CRASH!!!

An enormous, overbearing figure draped in garish red clothing, multiple equally frayed scarves, polka-dotted red on white pants and standing nearly nine feet tall nonchalantly threw himself through one of the castle's upper windows, raining glass and wooden splinters down the roof.

"MWAHAHAHA!!!"

Heedless of the menagerie of shouting and yelling emanating from the bedroom from whence he fled, including the presence of unnaturally powerful yet sealed magic concealed by someone yet to face their fears, Gilgamesh skated down the rooftop.

"After countless hours of meticulous planning..."

Inches away from falling over the edge, he bent both knees, drew air deep into his lungs, heard someone order the guards downstairs and *jumped*. It was a smooth jump. One might even suggest it was parabolic. An arcing ascent over the castle's interior courtyard, where he happened to notice but a handful of butlers and handmaidens making their rounds. How very strange. For a castle of such quaint opulence, there weren't many on-call servants like Lindblum and Hollow Bastion.

"... and more than a few setbacks..."

The nameless sword... well, it had a name, he just refused to decipher that many strange consonants and vowels... in his middle right hand glittered like sapphires in the sunlight when he cleared the front gates by a coeurl's whisker, landing halfway down the bridge alongside a climactic, thematically appropriate splashing of salt water through the air.

"... it's finally mine!"

To think the royal couple hoisted such a magnificently arming sword above their bed. What did they think it was, some form of hunting trophy? Humph! No matter where he travelled there would always be people who couldn't appreciate the finer things in life. Like weapons. And the occasional gun, but only if said gun is attached to some sort of handle. Ooh! Like a... what did the kids call them these days... oh, right! Gunblade! As a connoisseur, he couldn't be picky. Gunblades might not be legendary blades, or whatever rarity the Scissor Blades deserved, but still, he *really* wanted to give one of those things a test drive.

"Now then..."

After one last premature hurrah at another successful adventure with minimal injuries, either himself or his ill-fated adversaries who just so happened to stand in his way, Gilgamesh spun around, "... time to make my dramatic -"

SPLASH!!!

"Whoops."

Hands tucked inside her pockets and expression somewhere between annoyance and irritation, Ryuko watched Gilgamesh tumble over the side of the bridge, eyes barely blinking as an enormous column of water shot into the air. Nonchalantly reaching out and grabbing the sword the multiarmed bastard most-likely stole minutes before they arrived, she lowered her foot, traces of fire magic still clinging to her sneaker.

"Didn't see ya there."

BOOM!

In a vicious flurry of limbs, swords, clothing and embarrassment, Gilgamesh exploded out of the water, "Who dares assault me, the great and mighty -"

One look at the woman who kicked him into the water - and her equally respectable sister - immediately plucked the wind from his sails.

"Ryuko!?"

Somewhat bewildered by his sworn rival's surprising arrival on backwater, nondescript world dozens of astronomical units off the beaten path, particularly since he hadn't been doing anything suspicious in quite some time, Gilgamesh nevertheless offered Ryuko - and Satsuki - sincere greetings, "It's been a few months. How are you doing? No. No. You don't need to answer. Oh, by the way, I heard about your cinematic confrontation on Twilight Town. Hey, just between us, you mind filling your old pal Gilgamesh on some of the details?"

"No."

"Aw, c'mon!"

"No."

"Can you at least tell me about their weapon?"

"No."

"Please?"

"NO."

Gilgamesh tried scratching his chin, something made moderately difficult thanks to the fashionable *and* enchanted scarves wrapped around it,

"Well, I appreciate your candor."

Acutely aware of the cacophony growing behind the castle gates, including one or two familiar voices from his recent foray, the multiarmed swordsman scoffed. Whether to himself or Ryuko, or perhaps Satsuki, one could not say. But a sound similar to a scoff escaped his throat. And he did, in fact, pronounce mild annoyance when Ryuko nonchalantly tossed the legendary blade, passed down through the royal family for generations, to Satsuki, "However, be that as it may, and it most certainly isn't, I didn't come all this way for you to swoop in at the last second as if demanded by the plot!"

"By the... what?"

The unanticipated high level of nonsensical bullshit threw Ryuko's mind through a loop.

But not enough to *not* notice Gilgamesh trying to slip away in the confusion.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Faster than Satsuki reached towards the white scabbard attached to her belt, manicured thumb flicking against said weapon's crossguard, revealing the slightest hint of highly polished metal, Ryuko stepped in front of Gilgamesh, cutting off the swordsman's retreat before he left the bridge.

"We're not finished talking!"

Instead of being cowed by her not-so-friendly smirk, cracking knuckles and unstated promise of kicking his ass, Gilgamesh leapt over her head, knees tucked to his chest.

"On the contrary, Ryuko, I do believe we - GAH!!!"

Before the bastard finished bragging about his grand escape, Ryuko reached out, grabbed several of his scarves and physically pulled him backwards.

"... you were saying?"

With unwavering willpower and self-determination, Gilgamesh planted one hand on the ground, utilized another two as awkward pivots, yanked his scarves out of Ryuko's possession and leapt on the side of the bridge, "I was *saying* that though we might be rivals, fated to clash again and again until light is extinguished, what I do and don't do with my free time is none of your business!"

"Yeah, it kinda is!"

"Is not!"

"Is too!"

"Is not!"

"Is too, dumbass!"

"Bah! I don't have time for trivial and meaningless debates!"

"The hell does that mean!?"

"It means exactly what it means, Ryuko Matoi!"

The Genji Armor clanked and shifted as Gilgamesh stepped forward, landing with an obnoxious *thump* onto the bridge proper, Kikuichimonji materializing from a magical sigil around his feet, "Now then, although I'm not one to express mercy, especially when on the job, you and I are comrades as well as sworn rivals. Therefore, I shall ask one final time you hand over that blade or else -"

"Or else *what*!?"

Snorting under her breath, Ryuko matched the bastard's gaze despite the noticeable difference between their heights, "Unless your next words are 'I'm sorry' or 'Forgive me,' me and Satsuki are gonna tear your ass a new -"

"THERE HE IS!!!"

"DON'T LET HIM GET AWAY!!!"

With a wooden creak, the castle gates swung open, allowing a handful of armed guards to rush onto the bridge.

Distracted by the sudden noise, Ryuko looked away from Gilgamesh.

An amateurish and stupid mistake.

While she was distracted by the guards, the multiarmed swordsman, thief, ne'er-do-well and all-around bastard swung Kikuichimonji overhead, summoning a phantasmal clock under his feet. It appeared but a moment. But still long enough for Satsuki's eyes to swivel in his direction. And for her right hand to grasp that interesting katana strapped to her fashionable belt.

"IT WAS ALL RYUKO'S IDEA!!!"

Yet by the time steel carved through the chilly midsummer afternoon, thrust forward alongside Satsuki's lightning-quick reflexes, Gilgamesh was already halfway down the street.

"SHE ORDERED ME TO STEAL THE SWORD!!!"

His sheer *audacity* stopped time itself.

"THE HELL!?"

Blinding, unyielding rage tinted Ryuko's vision crimson. She could hear Satsuki. She could hear her sis telling her to let Gilgamesh leave. That he wasn't worth it. But her sister's voice was muffled. Her

eyebrows twitched. Her lips twisted into a snarl. Threadcutter manifested in a flurry of brilliant crimson stars. And after tossing Satsuki's nonsensical pacifism to the ground and then stomping it into a bloody pulp, she *exploded* down the bridge after the cowardly bastard, kicking up a cloud of dust and water in her wake.

"GET BACK HERE, YOU GODDAMN SON OF A BITCH!!!!"

Last edited: Sep 10, 2019

Chapter 14.6

Jafar's personality differs between the games and manga. In the games, he's overconfident yet loyal to Maleficent. However, in the manga, he's a coward waiting for a chance to stab her in the back at the first chance. There's also the possibility both are true. Jafar is cunning. Perhaps in the games he's waiting for the perfect opportunity (e.g. after opening the door to Kingdom Hearts) to betray Maleficent. Playing loyal servant to Maleficent would ensure he gets close to that power without undue suspicion.

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/4/48/The_Cave_of_Wonders_-_Treasure_Room_%28Art%29.png/1024px-The_Cave_of_Wonders_-_Treasure_Room_%28Art%29.png]

"Well done."

Maleficent's laughter reverberated throughout the antechamber as she traced a finger along the keyhole.

"With the keyhole revealed, it's only a matter of time before the Heartless arrive."

Painted lips quirked at their corners. Thanks to the genie's potent, if somewhat limited, abilities, the seal protecting the keyhole was irrevocably shattered. Hearts truly were wondrous creations. Despite its entrance having been located, leaving it vulnerable to those pathetic creatures, as she reached into the darkness, curiosity searching for the crystallized essence of Agrabah's innumerable emotions, memories and experiences, an incomprehensibly powerful force pushed backwards. It forced her hand out, leaving her palm resting against what felt like a solid surface.

"And you even managed to recover the princess."

A perfectly manicured fingernail traced patterns down her staff as her gaze fell towards the unconscious woman slumbering at her feet, "Which brings us to six. Leaving but one heart to locate."

The only other person standing within the antechamber muttered at the backhanded compliment.

"Yes, the djinn's reputed omnipotence proved itself true, wouldn't you agree?"

Draped in extravagant black robes and accompanying miter, Jafar ignored the genie silently floating overhead, bound to the lamp dangling from his waist, "To unravel such powerful protections was no small feat. Although it's quite shameful its power is... *limited*."

"Yes..."

Agreeing, if only barely, with the vizier, Maleficent walked away the keyhole, the barest of limps influencing her posture. Everything had limits. The genie's phenomenal cosmic power was no exception. When she'd temporarily appropriated the lamp, commanding its eternally bound servant restore the unhealable wounds she suffered at the hands of Ryuko, it had blatantly refused granting her wish, claiming only those born upon this world could request any three nearly limitless wishes.

"Wishing the final princess straight to our doorstep would have made things so much easier..."

As well as being unable to extend its influence beyond the world's boundaries.

"... but alas, it seems we must proceed as originally planned."

Her manicured fingers, colored dark maroon, caressed a familiar staff as it manifested within brilliant emerald flames, "Bring the princess to the others. And prepare the Heartless to finish off this -"

THUMP!!!

The antechamber trembled, dust and sand falling from the ceiling.

BOOM!!!

When another explosion shook the Cave of Wonders, Maleficent found her interest piqued. A thin eyebrow arching in modest curiosity, she lightly tapped the crystalline sphere atop her staff. Almost immediately, tendrils of magic reached across space-time, penetrating the gaps between dimensions as easily as one drew breath. Darkness. Light. Life Fibers. None of that mattered. Only a handful of beings could possibly interfere with her magic. And upon recognizing what, or rather *who*, was fighting their way through the magical caverns, her bemused frown deepened.

"It seems we have company."

"The boy's more persistent than expected."

Grumbling under his breath, Jafar glared at the street rat's flickering image, "I was certain without the genie's power the Heartless would have made quick work of him."

"*Never* underestimate the Keyblade..."

Maleficent's *authority* superseded whatever claim to annoying the grand vizier thought he possessed. The coldness of her tranquil fury subsumed the antechamber. Long-simmering indignation roiled within her twisted heart. It smothered sconces and torches, extinguishing their eternal orange-red flames before violently replaced such warm and comforting light with corruptive emerald.

"... even if its 'chosen wielder' is rather inexperienced."

And then the fairy's tempestuous rage quelled, leaving her otherwise flawless features, marred by a faded scar curling down her chin, smoothed into a porcelain mask.

"But perhaps 'inexperienced' is the wrong choice of words."

Gently caressing several fingers against the magical sphere, Maleficent strutted away from the keyhole, tattered robes dragging across the ground, "To have fought Exdeath - assuming history hasn't lied about the sorcerer perishing against Fusoya - is no small feat. If Hades hadn't brought the matter to my attention, I would never have believed it. A rather interesting development, wouldn't you agree?"

"*Quite.*"

Unfamiliar with either name, Jafar begrudgingly scoffed, "At the very least, we needn't concern ourselves with Ryuko."

"Indeed."

Malice oozed from the sorceress's heart, warmth and compassion nowhere to be found, "Thanks to your little pet, we know Ryuko and Gilgamesh are traipsing through the Realm of Darkness. While I'm curious *why* she'd venture into such a place, it matters not. With her heart focused on another objective, finding the final princess and obtaining Kingdom Hearts becomes that much easier."

"If not for her interference, I would have already deposed that insufferable sultan!"

The treacherous vizier snarled as countless years prostrating himself before that demented imbecile, granted kingship through something as trivially stupid as birthright, forced their way to the surface. But just as quickly, indignant fury cooled into modest yet nauseating disgust, "Then again, Ryuko barging into the palace brought her association with that annoying thief to our attention. If she hadn't spoken with *his majesty*, we wouldn't be having this *jovial* conversation, would we?"

"Ryuko is a threat. That much is true."

With a callous wave of her hand, Maleficent dismissed the image showing Sora and his companions fighting their way through the Cave of Wonders, "But she's not your *only* threat."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Valuable resources have been sacrificed keeping Ryuko, Merlin and several other dangerous individuals out of our collective hair. Far more than a backstabbing, traitorous man such as yourself could *possibly* understand," the sorceress's tone hardened. Malevolence radiated from her twisted heart, "But perhaps I'm mistaken. Perhaps you believe yourself capable of standing against Ryuko. The self-proclaimed greatest sorcerer in the universe. Or did you vow to betray me once Kingdom Hearts was within our grasp?"

"You've misunderstood. That was merely in jest, you see!"

Amused lips quirked as Maleficent smiled not at Jafar, nor the precocious individuals sprinting head-long to their deaths, but the darkness recoiling within the treacherous yet pathetic grand vizier's heart, "Just remember one thing - you are merely an expendable asset. Fail me and I could easily replace you with another, more loyal agent. Have I made myself clear?"

It required every ounce of self-control for Jafar to simply swallow the lump in his throat.

"... crystal."

A moment passed before the pressure upon the vizier's heart vanished.

"Good..."

Returning her attention to the keyhole, Maleficent ignored the treacherous sorcerer's intensifying hatred, deigning instead to focus on the matter at hand, "See to it that you live up to my expectations."

BOOM!!!

CRASH!!!

BANG!!!

"Perhaps it's time to explain the situation to your ward?"

Yellow eyes shadowed by violet make-up narrowed at the question, "No. Not yet. Riku's heart isn't quite ready. Ryuko's influence, however diluted, remains frustratingly resilient. It's taken time and effort earning his trust. And as you undoubtedly know, trust is rather *difficult* to regain upon being lost."

"How long do you intend on dragging the wool over his -"

"JAFAR!!!"

As the heartfelt despair and frustration reached her ears, Maleficent's attention shifted towards the antechamber's entrance, giving her a front-row seat to the lamp's former master and his soon-to-be deceased comrades emerging from the darkness after fighting their way through countless Heartless.

"LET JASMINE GO!!!"

Instead of acknowledging the street urchin's demand to relinquish the princess or suffer retaliatory consequence, she addressed the traitorous vizier with a lighthearted, almost jovial tone belonging to someone discussing tomorrow's weather, "I shall be on my way. I'll leave you to clean up the rabble."

"Rabble!?"

Squawking despite knowing who was standing in front of them, Donald's eyebrow twitched, "Who're you calling 'rabble?'"

"Do be sure to kill them as *painfully* as possible."

Her black-horned headdress devoured the sickening emerald light blazing from malformed sconces and torches when the duck's mouth snapped shut with an audible *snap*. A reaction eliciting more than its fair share of malicious amusement upon painted lips.

"However, leave our little friend here alive."

The sadistic emphasis and malevolent, almost spiteful, exhilaration in the witch's voice caused Goofy and Donald to close ranks around Sora, "I have other plans for him."

"You're... Maleficent?"

In a shimmer of gold and white, the Keyblade manifested in Sora's trembling fingers. He almost couldn't believe it. This was Maleficent. This was the person who scared Leon, Aerith and Yuffie and everyone. The evil witch Ryuko couldn't take down. The woman controlling the Heartless that destroyed his world. Sora swallowed the lump his throat as his arms and legs turned to lead. His heart beat a mile a minute. And without dragging his eyes away from the sorceress, Sora could tell, beyond any doubt, Donald and Goofy felt the same way.

"Ah, it seems my reputation proceeds me."

The sorceress's predatory smile stretched further as she sauntered beyond Jafar, every staggered step carrying the heavy weight of death, "Sora, I presume? Such *awful* manners for a Keyblade wielder. Then again, your master is Ryuko. So, I suppose politeness was bound to be thrown to the wayside."

Her staff *tapped* against sandstone when none of the trio, or the accompanying street rat, uttered a single word.

"Oh? What's wrong?"

A dark chuckle passed through her grinning lips, "You came all this way to rescue the princess, did you not? Well, what are you waiting

for?"

Nothing happened.

After granting the pathetic fools an entire minute to choose between life and a pointless, agonizing death, several times longer than she usually afforded, Maleficent chortled. She'd thought at least one of them would attempt an overly dramatic rescue. Perhaps the knight or mage. Or perhaps the urchin, his intense and disgusting infatuation towards the princess worn upon his sleeveless arms. But alas, it was not to be. Yet the strange glint in Sora's eyes caught her attention. She couldn't help but notice his grasp upon the Keyblade tightening or the defiance clinging to his trembling heart.

It *disgusted* her.

"Do you believe your Keyblade is enough to stand against me, the mistress of all evil?"

Her smugness pierced the shadows, an egotistical mockery of warmth and genuine happiness, "You truly know nothing, do you?"

It wouldn't take much to end the boy's life.

But she didn't.

Not yet.

Not until the time was right.

Of course, the Keyblade was a fickle weapon. One bound to its wearer's heart. It would not have chosen Sora if there wasn't something *special* about the boy. Perhaps his connection with Ryuko afforded some measure of worthiness. She could not say. But allowing him to survive introduced the distinct possibility, however minute it might be, he could eventually become an annoying hindrance. But she doubted the boy would ever become a danger. Despite holding the Keyblade, he lacked formal training. His

repertoire of magic was extremely limited. He knew nothing of light and darkness outside basic information. And more importantly, he did not possess the disgusting parasites which granted Ryuko her eldritch strength.

All the boy had was a Keyblade.

While *she* was the mistress of all evil.

"Finish them quickly."

As the anthropomorphic mallard who called himself a 'mage' squawked unintelligibly, Maleficent's gaze swept leftward, meeting her treacherous associate's disdainful snarl, "There's still much to be done."

"But of course..."

Concealing his disdain until Maleficent vanished in a manner reminiscent of that horrendous flea-bitten feline, Jafar genuflected, biting his tongue hard enough he was almost certain it bled. And only when the sorceress returned to that dilapidated castle serving as her headquarters, leaving but lingering darkness in her wake, did his forced smirk twisted into what resembled outright hatred.

"... you wretched hag."

How dare she threaten him! He was Jafar! Second to no one! If not for his efforts, Princess Jasmine wouldn't have fallen into their grasp, leaving but a single heart devoid of darkness to locate. That the contemptible witch *dared* talk down to him... treating him as nothing more than a pawn in some unstated game... was the final straw! Once he finished dealing with the street rat and his annoying friends, he'd use the genie's phenomenal power to supplant Maleficent as the greatest, most powerful sorcerer to have ever lived!

"I think not!"

In the midst of his roiling anger, an absurd projectile - a shield bearing that foolish king's royal emblem marred by cracks and dents - ricocheted off a translucent mauve barrier.

"You'll have to do better than that!"

In a cascade of raging flames and writhing darkness hot enough to melt uncovered flesh from charred bone, Jafar smashed his staff against the sweltering ground, hatred oozing like oil from his booming voice, "The witch might desire you alive, but I certainly do not!"

"MOVE!!!"

His demented grin widened at the street rat's mounting desperation.

"Getting warm, boy?"

White-hot flames spread across the floor, stretching further and further from his body before, with a sudden explosion, they drew upwards. Fire spiraled and twisted within a raging tornado. A maelstrom of death and destruction capable of reducing flesh to ash. His laughter echoed throughout the Cave of Wonders as a hooded cobra, born from the conflagration making it nearly impossible to breath, coiled overhead, darkness dripping from its burning fangs.

"Perhaps you simply can't take the HEAT!!!"

It should have been his victory.

Yet as his elemental serpent struck, the annoying street rat unsheathed a peculiar scimitar.

An azure blade glistening brightly against the raging inferno.

And he suddenly found himself thrown against the wall by an immense wave of water.

"Gah... hah... hah..."

The tidal wave receded as quickly as it manifested. Thrown against the keyhole, lungs heaving during that painful moment when water filled his throat, Jafar slid down the wall, blood pouring from the corners of his mouth.

"Y-You..."

It was only by the grace of circumstance the street rat and his companions didn't attack, either out of stupidity or misguided honor. But lying on his stomach, gasping for breath, Jafar snarled through clenched teeth. And then his eyes *widened*, bewilderment touching his darkened heart.

"That sword!"

Drenched to the bone, he struggled off the ground, gnarled fingers using his staff as a crutch, "The legendary treasure of Agrabah! How did you find it!? Tell me!"

"Huh? Legendary?"

Somewhat baffled by *what* happened, Aladdin delicately turned the still-glowing scimitar over in his hands before glancing at Genie, who shrugged with a confused expression on his sunburned face, "You don't say. I guess this means I owe Abu an apology."

"A fool to the end, I see..."

The barest traces of emerald light caressed his clothing. A cursory manifestation of restoration magic. Enough to revert his wounds and allow him to stand and breath without searing pain cracking his ribs. But once restored to something resembling normalcy, Jafar's expression darkened, "I do not know *how* you came across the legendary treasure! But don't think it shall be enough to defeat me!"

"Jasmine!"

Aladdin didn't think, he *moved*, when Jafar's staff swung towards the princess, "Let her go, Jafar! Take me instead!"

"You!? Don't make me laugh, boy!"

Glacial ice erupted from the floor, sending shattered rock falling the air. Cold enough for what little vapor existed in the Cave of Wonders to condense into mist. The spikes crisscrossed one another at obtuse, random angles. Their presence split the antechamber down the middle, turning the street rat's amusing attempt at saving the princess into a painful, bloodied retreat, "The princess is far more valuable than your pathetic life!"

"Shut up!"

Sora tapped the Keyblade against Aladdin, healing his scrapes and bruises, before glaring at Jafar, "What does that even mean!?"

"Ah ah ah!"

Wagging his finger at the question, Jafar quipped, "As they say, silence is golden."

"But duct tape is silver!"

The strange analogy bewildered the treacherous grand vizier. And if he was being honest with himself, Sora was a little bit confused as well. He'd heard it one. Ryuko grumbled about something Satsuki said. He couldn't quite remember. But her weird comeback and always stuck in his heart, "If you won't talk, then we'll just have to make you talk!"

Jafar laughed, mockingly and arrogantly, "You might wield the key, but you're no match for me, the greatest sorcerer who ever lived! Second to no one!"

"I didn't know you told JOKES, Jafar!"

Not a breath was uttered.

Not a word was spoken.

The antechamber grew deathly silent as Jafar's beady eyes swiveled from Sora towards the street rat.

"*What* did you say?"

A mocking shit-eating smirk stretched across Aladdin's face as he staggered back onto his feet, "You put on a big show. A lot of theatrics. Almost had me convinced you were something of a threat. Sure, you're strong. But that other woman? Now *she* was terrifying. With all that power... heh, it's no wonder you're taking orders from her."

"How dare you!"

"You might have Genie and a couple of wishes, but compared to her, I'm afraid you're just second best," stroking his chin while purposely turning away from Jafar, Aladdin pursed his lips and sighed, "The second most powerful sorcerer in the world just doesn't have the same ring as *the* most powerful sorcerer in the world, now does it? Of course, with the power of the genie, you could easily change that..."

"Uh, Al?"

Genie could feel the tension growing thick enough to slice with a knife, toast the bread and make a triple-decker sandwich, "What are you doing? Why are you taunting Gargamel?"

"Trust me, I have a plan," Aladdin whispered over his shoulder to Sora, "I hope."

"You impudent little..."

Spittle flew between Jafar's clenched teeth.

"Second best, am I?"

Hoisting the lamp over his head, the treacherous vizier snarled at the enslaved djinn, "GENIE!!! FOR MY SECOND WISH, MAKE ME THE MOST POWERFUL SORCERER IN THE WORLD!!!"

"... as you command, master."

Rolling up his metaphorical sleeves, cuff-links and all, Genie sighed with just enough reluctance that anybody paying attention would have noticed something... *off*. He spun and swirled his hands over each other, building up more and more magic. He added a little extra *oomph* for that bar-closing kick. He cocked back a finger, one eye closed, before shooting a bright beam of twinkling, multicolored magic straight into Jafar's darkened heart.

"YES! YES! THE POWER!"

As the djinn's magic seeped into his heart, Jafar reared his head back and laughed.

"I CAN FEEL THE POWER!!! I CAN... huh?"

The vizier's insane howling faltered into confused muttering.

"Where's the power?"

Patting himself down, Jafar looked around, utterly befuddled, "Where is my power!?"

"*Technically* you wished to become the most powerful sorcerer in the world."

POOF!!!

A pair of reading glasses manifested on Genie's outstretched nose as he leaned backwards, thumbing through a paperclip-bound copy of the story's script, "Let's see... Sora travels to Agrabah... Sora and Aladdin save Jasmine from Jafar... ah, here it is! *Maleficent exits Agrabah stage left, leaving Jafar, Grand Vizier of Agrabah and tall, dark and sinister ugly man, the powerful sorcerer on the world.*"

"WHAT!?"

"Upon confessing his undying hatred for said sorceress, Jafar will be goaded into wasting his second wish, thereby ruining the rest of his afternoon," with a snap, the script disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

"I am your master!!!"

"Well, excuse *me*, Mister Machiavellian, but any good back-alley schemer should have known the deal is always in the details."

Entirely uninterested in his master's growing conniption at being outplayed at his own game, Genie floated towards the ceiling, both hands folded behind his back, "But hey, I'm sure you'll get your third wish right. Oh! And remember boys and girls, the secret word of the day is 'duck.'"

"Duck?"

Jafar barely had enough time to sneer at the insufferable djinn before Sora used Goofy's shield as a springboard, leapt above the glacier thanks to Donald's assistance, reared his arm backwards and *threw* his Keyblade.

"Ooh... that's gotta hurt."

Leaning backwards above the chaotic fray, Genie shoved a handful of popcorn into his mouth as Jafar's nose shattered in a spray of blood, "And they call this a family-friendly game."

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Chapter 14.7

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/6/6f/Reprimanding_Ryuko.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20150330072239]

"Being a prisoner sure is boring."

Underneath the darkened halls of Hollow Bastion, locked within a cell previously reserved for hardened criminals and unfortunate victims of Xehanort's obsession, Mako Mankanshoku grumbled.

"Everybody always says it's a lot of fun... but it never is."

As hard as she tried, and her head still hurt from how hard she thought about it, she couldn't remember anything between Pete tossing her into his fancy Gummi Ship with the weird racing decals featuring someone called Captain Dark and that mean old witch magicking her into the cell. Just some weird laughter. Then awkward silence. Then pleading, screaming and crying for someone's mom. Then lots of lightning and green flames shooting everywhere like fire hydrants. Then the stomach-twisting *oomph* she'd always felt whenever Mister Disney or Lulu helped her take a shortcut from one world to another lickety-split.

"Sigh..."

Being the only prisoner in a fancy prison was boring. She *really* wanted someone to talk to. Even a jaded criminal framed for a crime he didn't commit. Someone waiting for the right time to break out and expose the truth to his friends and family. But all she had for company were several mice that didn't talk, ominous groans and a weird white Heartless always popping its head out of the shadows whenever it thought she wasn't looking.

She called him Mister Gopher.

"Is Ira okay?"

Kneeling barefoot on the floor, knees tucked against her chest and cheeks puffed out, dust swirled around Mako's fingers as she began tracing strange patterns.

"I hope he's okay."

Nobody believed kidnapping was an 'all weekend' activity. But it was true. And it always happened the same way. Someone loud and wearing fancy clothes or leaking darkness like a rusty faucet, probably with a really sad backstory about how their parents never got them a puppy, took her hostage. They'd say something about being 'the most powerful sorceress in the entire universe' or seeking revenge against Ryuko for forgetting to tip a waitress in Twilight Town. Then Ryuko would burst through the wall, kick their butt and give her a piggy-back ride home.

And sometimes, if things went pear-shaped, Lady Satsuki would save her.

But out of everyone, Ira gave the best piggy-back rides.

Not that she'd ever tell Ryuko.

"I bet he's really angry."

Her husband was strong. Maybe not as strong as Ryuko, but he was still pretty strong. The strongest guy in Lindblum next to Greg whenever the funny man stopped by to share stories about his amazing adventures. But when push came to shove, nothing in the whole wide world could stop her Shnookums. Not being stranded on another world. Or contact football with empty suits. Or solid wood walls and kitchen tables covered with fancy foods, napkins and imported plates from Alexandria.

"Paying for everything's going to cost a lot of money... like, *a lot* of money."

Regent Cid was one of the nicest people she knew. Like, super nice. Almost as nice as Ryuko. He'd probably forgive Ira for bulldozing an entire neighborhood. And then give him some money as a reward. Oh, but then she'd feel awful about taking free money. And if she felt terrible, Ira would feel terrible. And if they both felt terrible about taking the money, Ryuko would feel twice as awful about not being there to beat up Pete and save the day.

And seeing Ryuko upset always made her cry.

I wonder if Ryuko's having fun?"

On her tippy-toes, Mako continued drawing weird patterns on the ground, "I bet she's having lots of fun with Greg."

Her best friend was probably having an exciting adventure.

All without her.

"I should probably try escaping... but I don't know where to go."

Staring at the picture she'd drawn in the dust, one of her and Ryuko riding a fire-breathing chocobo while lightning shot out of Ryuko's Keyblade, Mako grumbled.

"And I don't have a Gummi Ship license... so even if I escaped, I couldn't *really* escape."

As she sighed again, Mako shook her head, clenched one hand into a fist and defiantly scowled.

"No! Mako Mankanshoku never, ever gives up! If someone won't rescue me, then I'll just have to escape all on my own! Because being a prisoner in an empty prisoner is super-duper boring!"

Don't Lose Your Heart

"... the connection is exceptionally weak..."

Pale fingers were nothing more than rapid blurs across the keyboard. Exhausted eyes swiveled back and forth, turning from one monitor to another, while streams of incomprehensible data reflected off tinted glasses, "... but as you can see, the realm positioning tracker I've installed into Mankanshoku's wedding ring is online and operational."

"I'm going to pretend you didn't just confess to stalking my wife."

"Stalking implies I'm interested in Mankanshoku."

The quiet humming from the surrounding servers overwhelmed Inumuta's scoff as he rolled his eyes at the impatient behemoth of a man looming over his chair, "The realm positioning tracker, or RPT for short, is a miniaturization of the systems installed into every Gummi Ship built by McDuck Enterprises. Quite a few innovations in Gummi technology and electrical engineering needed to be invented to fit everything onto Mankanshoku's ring. In other words, it was a prototype. A highly classified prototype. To ensure it retained full functionality over time necessitated infrequent activation and behavior monitoring. All legal under Lindblum law."

"So, you admit your wrongdoing?"

Houka Inumuta briefly stopped typing.

"If you're going to pop a blood vessel over perfectly legal surveillance, blame Matoi."

It was coming. He knew it was coming before a single word left his mouth. That was simply how these conversations devolved. Still, it wasn't entirely disadvantageous. Mankanshoku's kidnapping at the

hands of Maleficent's right-hand man, or perhaps nearly incompetent lacky better described Pete's constant bumbling, afforded a unique opportunity to correct an egregious mistake, "Installing the RPT into your wife's wedding ring was *her* suggestion. Not mine."

"SHE WHAT!?"

Gamagori's outrage reached the furthest corners of the subbasement underneath McDuck Enterprises.

"Do you recall a particular incident five years ago?"

A question that simple shouldn't have have accomplished so much. But over several seconds, Inumuta observed multiple emotions dance across Gamagori's face. It started with moderate annoyance, which quickly shifted into confusion and bewilderment before finally, long after it should have been blatantly obvious, settling upon morbid embarrassment. All of which was eternally captured via high definition video through nothing more than a single press of the 'return' key.

"... don't remind me."

"Well, after that unfortunate incident and the subsequent political fallout, Matoi barged into my office and demanded I develop a fool-proof solution."

He was quite aware of Gamagori's reluctance discussing the not-so-recent past. That didn't mean he cared. On the contrary, he really didn't. Data was data. Why some people couldn't understand such a simple concept eluded him, "Because, and I'm quoting her directly, she was 'concerned you'd have a heart attack and drop dead, which would make buying a dress for your funeral a pain in the ass.'"

"Matoi said that?"

"I recorded our conversation."

It took a few keystrokes. Thirteen, to be specific. But on the upper left monitor, previously filled with spreadsheets and graphs, a small program opened. A special program. One that began transferring hundreds of gigabytes of seemingly useless data across McDuck Enterprises, "For posterity, of course. And evidence on the remote chance you discovered the RPT and Matoi attempted pinning one hundred percent of the blame on me."

"Can you *find* Mako?"

The voice, possessing just enough familiar cold authority that he momentarily wondered when Lady Satsuki returned to Lindblum, severed the awkward tension like hot knife through butter.

"Yes, but it'll take some time."

He didn't stop typing when Beatrix strutted through the doors, flagrantly disregarding proper protocol while refusing to knock. That's what cameras were for, "Due to its size, the RPT has an effective maximum range. If Mankanshoku was being held somewhere between Lindblum and... oh, I don't know... the Gold Saucer, for example, this screen..."

A nonchalant motion of his head towards the lower right monitor, which showed nothing but endless static and error messages, caught both Gamagori and Beatrix's attention.

"... would display a three-dimensional topological map of her current location down to the centimeter."

"And?"

"And she's obviously *much* farther away than the Gold Saucer."

Perhaps backhanded snark against someone more than capable of rendering him worse than dead with a single thrust of her arm was a terrible life choice. But considering how tired he was, not to mention the terrible circumstances, decorum would have to wait until some

indeterminate moment in the future, "I've freed every available flop of computing power by tapping into the central mainframe, but the RPT's signal is incredibly weak."

With a soft push of his sneakers against his desk, Inumuta swiveled around, facing the master, "Either she's somewhere really far away... or she's somewhere with a lot of electrical or magical interference."

Beatrix's remaining eye, a deep reddish-purple tinted soft blue and green by the ambient lighting, slightly narrowed at the information.

"How much time will you need?"

"It's difficult to say."

"Guess."

A voice in the back of his head suggested that was more of an order than a request. Whether or not one existed, Beatrix was ordering him to give her an answer. Once more pushing off the floor, Inumuta swiveled around, stopping right before his left hand collided with the long-emptied coffee mug, "Honestly? That's impossible. There are far too many variables to answer such a question. But presuming the RPT remains online and operational with minimal interruptions in signal strength and quality, somewhere between five to nine days."

"That long!?"

The loud *thumping* of Gamagori's foot against the floor shook Inumuta's desk, "Can't you work faster!?"

"No. I can't."

Inumuta pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose before answering, quite succinctly, the underlying question, "It's not as simple as 'pointing and clicking' a mouse and hoping you get something. These things take time. You, of all people, should know

how *difficult* collecting data can be. Before you barged through the door, I'd just finished spending six straight days and nights rewriting thousands of lines of code. I've canceled dozens of projects to free up enough computing power to test my revised tracking software. And I had to write an email to Scrooge explaining why I've delayed our company's latest Gummi Ship operating system for another three months, driving down the year's forecasted profit by almost thirty percent."

"I -"

The muscular blacksmith attempted to respond. One that died on the tip of his tongue, replaced by an honest and heartfelt apology, "Forgive me, Inumuta. I allowed my concern for Mako overwhelm common sense. But allow me to ask another question - the tracker is still active, is it not?"

"Yes, why?"

"That sadistic hag went through quite a bit of effort kidnapping my wife."

It took Gamagori more than a little effort to lean down until his face was level with the upper row of Inumuta's monitors. To the casual observer, such as the average man or woman on the street, he seemed calm. Perhaps a little detached. As if something was on his mind. But his heart was an emotional maelstrom. Even physically restraining his fury did nothing to prevent the slightest twitch of his eyebrow. Or the bulging tendons and blood vessels on his arms and neck, "She knew when Matoi and Lady Satsuki would be off-world. And how long it would require Master Beatrix to travel at full speed from Alexandria."

"Are you suggesting someone tipped Maleficent off?"

"Precisely."

While the two men conversed, Beatrix's mind wandered.

Gently cupping her chin as several thoughts, each conflicting and opposing one another, circulated through the depths of her heart, she tilted her head forward, chestnut brown hair falling over the silver eyepatch covering the right side of her face. The idea of a traitor in the city guard, or even a greedy neighbor or shopkeeper, was distasteful. But she doubted it was true. Treachery wasn't necessary for a sorceress of Maleficent's prowess to spy on Ryuko. Not when the witch could pierce through the veil of space and time with nothing more than a callous wave of her hand, disregarding Merlin and Yen Sid's efforts at keeping her prying eyes away from the world.

But why would the malevolent fairy kidnap Mako?

"Get some rest, Houka."

Her words came at a fortunate time. Entirely by coincidence. Nonchalantly interrupting Gamagori's latest theory about where Maleficent might have taken Mako, she subtly adjusted her posture in such a way that it looked like she was lastly slightly to the right, "And once you've deduced where Pete took Mako, inform Yen Sid."

"Not to complain..."

Inumuta didn't know what to think of her suggestion. It wasn't bad. It wasn't good. It was just... what was the word... impossible considering the available information, "... but you really believe Maleficent's short-sighted enough to bring Mankanshoku *there*?"

"Not intentionally."

A faint smile pulled upon the corners of Beatrix's lips. An expression personifying the righteous anger and indignant fury coursing through her heart, "Maleficent's intuitive grasp of black magic is second only to Merlin and Lulu. Loathe as I am to admit, her skill vastly exceeds my own. The same cannot, however, be said about technology."

"Technology?"

"Maleficent hails from an enchanted, mystical world where only the most imaginative dream of what you and I take as normal," folding her arm underneath her bosom, Beatrix's eye narrowed at Gamagori's inquiry until only traces of reddish-purple remained visible in the deep purple light, "Say you found something spectacular. A device that could create almost anything. That could *do* anything. Would you waste time attempting to understand how it worked? Or would you simply learn how to use it?"

"Ah! Of course!"

The sheer *brilliance* of Beatrix's example caused Inumuta's glasses to slip down the bridge of his nose, "Why didn't I think of that?"

"What?"

Gamagori's head whipped back and forth, "What are you talking about?"

"Beatrix's suggesting Maleficent lacks even the most basic understanding of modern technology!"

He was typing faster than he could remember typing in months. Line after line of code filled two out of the four monitors, streams of green text in black boxes, broken only by random messages. For the first time since Matoi rescued him from that godforsaken world, he was motivated behind corporate innovation. Something he hadn't felt in years. Not since they'd graduated from Honnouji Academy after dealing with those second-hand clones and the school's defense apparatus.

"In other words, the sorceress more than likely developed magical countermeasures to prevent Merlin and Yen Sid from divining her location. Perhaps even send them to the complete opposite end of reality."

"But what about a miniature realm positioning tracker?"

"Do you think she anticipated *that*?"

As the younger man's fingers devolve into rapid blurs on the keyboard, depressing keys fast enough she was certain something would eventually break, nimble fingers tossed chestnut brown hair over her shoulder. It was abhorrent. Given the opportunity and despite whatever ramifications might occur, Beatrix knew, without any doubt in her heart, she would have rescued Mako and taken Pete into custody. She found everything about the situation repugnant. It filled her heart and mind with well-deserved disgust for even considering something beneficial could possibly follow an invasion that left hundreds injured or dead.

But at long last, Maleficent *finally* made a mistake.

Chapter 15.1

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/a/a4/1071.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140228052732>]

Grass crunched beneath her boot.

The old mansion lacked style, passion and flair and a certain *je ne sais quoi* she couldn't quite put her tongue on. It loomed over Twilight Town like a decaying gargoyle. Locked behind a wrought-iron gate, sealed through means impossible for most humans to break, whoever moved into the place during her unexpected absence went through a lot of effort keeping their nose to the ground.

Well, too bad for them.

Extending her right arm, Nui Harime smirked as a purple and pink Keyblade materialized into her outstretched fingers. A languid breeze rustled the hem of her pink coat as her grasp on the Keyblade shifted ever-so-slightly. Now that Sora was doing important things, like slowly dismantling that mean old witch's organization, and Ryuko was traipsing through the Realm of Darkness in search of that stupid mouse, she could *finally* knock off another item on her 'to do' list she'd been putting off for several months.

Click!

A beam of light shot forth, connecting Seamstress to the locked doors barring her path forward. The sound of an ordinary metal lock reverberated within the vast ocean of her tranquil heart followed. Within the mansion, a machine combining magic and technology short-circuited, tearing the building's reclusive occupant away from

his somber work when obnoxious and acrid smoke billowed throughout his laboratory.

"Hello?"

She barely touched the handle. A little push with her pointer finger while Seamstress dissipated into shards of purple light and stars.

But that was more than sufficient to swing the doors open.

"Anybody home?"

Her question echoed into the darkness. The cheerful tone accompanying her words faded into abandoned hallways and long-forgotten rooms. But as dust fell from rusted hinges like raindrops glistening upon sunlight, her grin evoked malevolence. Of course, nobody could see it. Her customized double-breasted pink trench coat, modified to exclusively adorn her petite yet buxom figure, ensured nobody saw more than she wanted them to see. And yet she smiled, excitement flushing through her fluttering heart, because she simply could not care less about what humans thought about her.

The only person whose opinion she cherished was Ryuko.

But right now, not even Ryuko, if her sister was inclined to speaking like a civilized person instead of attacking at the drop of a hat, couldn't change her mind.

"Hmm... hmm... hmm..."

The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

If you gave a human the chance to hide, they'd quickly take you up on your offer.

As she walked inside the mansion, every step accompanied by a haunting melody that devouring the ambient light penetrating through the open doors, Nui's attention swiveled from one object to another.

Yup! She was right! Someone ~was~ living here! Because for a seemingly abandoned mansion left to rot and decay on the hills above Twilight Town, there sure wasn't a lot of debris lying around. There was still *some* garbage and rust scattered to the far corners and shadows. But compared to her last visit, several weeks before her regrettable misunderstanding with Ryuko, it was immaculate.

"I'm *really* sorry..."

Leaves rustled against cracked marble tiles as she half-skipped, half-walked towards the empty display underneath a fancy-looking chandelier. The *snap-click* of her boots, bright pink despite the lack of ambient light inside the foyer, reached the mansion's furthest corners.

"... but since nobody answered the door, I thought I'd just let myself in."

A door creaked overhead.

She didn't bother turning around. Or acknowledging she was no longer alone. A woman such as herself, who put on a fresh pair of underwear every morning, need only smile to have every pig in human clothing wrapped around her little finger. At least, that was what Ragyo Kiryuin claimed how things were supposed to work. Because humans usually screamed or begged for mercy whenever she visited them at dinner, lunch or early in the morning with a wide and friendly smile.

"I hope that's not rude or anything."

Manners were super important. You were supposed to introduce yourself before doing anything. Even if she interrupted a low-level programmer's dinner with his family to painfully slaughter them because he was ~considering~ betraying Revocs for those naked apes, she always knocked and announced her name, title and reason for stopping by.

"Oh, don't be scared."

But refusing to greet a guest? That was quite possibly even ruder than breaking down the front door. *Especially* when they were already in the room, "I'm not going to bite you... unless that's what you're into."

"How did you find me?"

Her initial impression was stark disappointment. The baritone voice *sounded* strict. Almost like he'd been a leader in the past. Good? Bad? She couldn't say. But no amount of bravado could conceal the truth.

"It wasn't ~too~ difficult."

The simplistic answer rolled off her tongue, clinging to the stuffy darkness as she took a *good* look at the human. Gosh, just as her expectations hit rock bottom, something like ~this~ happens and blows them sky high! She felt positively embarrassed by the revelation! Whatever his name was, and she really didn't care at all, the human glaring at her like she wasn't privy to the latest fashion trends was quite tall. Not too tall. Just tall enough to not be considered short. She couldn't make out too much of his dark skin, on account of the bandages wrapped around his head, but something about the human's appearance plucked her heart.

As for his clothes?

Careful consideration and deliberation calling upon her many years as a world-famous couturier afforded the man's style a six point three out of ten. Not good. But not awful. Better than Goku Uniforms. But not by much. Almost as if the human hiding within such awful clothes had ~zero~ fashion sense. Still, she *could* spot something far more interesting lurking underneath the gaudy surface.

"Let's just say I have a knack for ferreting out dirty old men who ~really~ shouldn't mess around with things they don't understand."

She could have moved.

She could have easily avoided the trap.

Maybe it was because she was bored. Or perhaps Ryuko's delinquent attitude influenced her heart. Who could say? She certainly couldn't. It was simply one of those mysteries as old as time itself. But when the human's yellow eye narrowed, she folded her arms behind her back and patiently waited as a magical sigil manifested around her boots. She didn't budge an inch from her spot. Instead she began counting down from ten.

At nine, her head tilted slightly to the right.

At eight, she smirked at the man.

And at seven, everything turned *white*.

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 15 - Never Can Say Goodbye

DiZ, formerly known as Ansem, expected more from the Nobody. How she discovered his location would forever remain a mystery. But it meant one thing - Xehanort knew where to find him. Which suggested - nay, implied - it was only a matter of time before his treacherous student sent a more competent lackey to finish the job. He had hours or perhaps a few days before the Nobody's absence garnered Xehanort's suspicions. Time necessary to collect his research and retreat into the darkness.

"Now, return to nonexistence."

His first realization something was horribly wrong was when the Nobody's corpse didn't dissipate into darkness.

"... no!"

Horror swelled within his heart.

"It can't be!"

The woman had been a Nobody. He was certain of it! Only those heartless abominations wore dark coats. Only those creatures lacking existence traveled through corridors composed of pure darkness. The intruder's coat might have been pink instead of black, but individualism didn't take away from her off-putting demeanor. Or the way her emotions never quite reached her eyes or voice. The abandoned shell of her body, lacking a heart and any reason to exist upon this world, should have immediately faded into darkness, waiting until such time it could become complete once more.

Yet bright crimson blood continued seeping into the cracks between marble tiles.

"I-I was so certain..."

Guilt paralyzed his heart. Numbness pervaded his body. Unable to breath, unable to move, he lurched forward, holding onto the banister with what little strength remained, "What have I done?"

"Whatcha lookin' at?"

Those three words immediately stole the breath from his lungs.

"What!?"

Unable to formulate anything beyond muted horror, DiZ's head snapped towards the familiar voice, "Impossible!"

"Impossible?"

From her newfound perch atop the candelabrum hanging ever-so-delicately above the foyer, Nui Harime playfully swung her legs back and forth. Her pink boots kicked the musty air like pendulums. Their metronomic motion serving to unnerve the already terrified human when the rest of her body didn't move so much as an inch, "Gosh!

That's rude! Perhaps you missed something super important! Did ~that~ thought cross your mind?"

With the woman's tittering laughter reverberating throughout his subconscious, DiZ stared at the corpse laying across the foyer.

He barely saw anything.

But what he *did* see caused his heart to skip a beat.

Something that stole every last drop of breath from his lungs.

The body was *unraveling*.

Starting at its feet and ending at its hooded face, the body dissolved into unnervingly familiar, infinitesimally thin purple-vermilion threads shimmering with sinister radiance, darkness and light existing side-by-side contrary to every natural law.

An exceptionally unique diametric phenomenon.

"Life Fibers!?"

DiZ's feet carried him away from the banister, "But how!?"

"Gotta say, didn't expect your booby trap to take down one of my cute little doppelgangers!"

Now that the jig was up, Nui lowered the pink hood concealing her beautiful face. Framed by voluminous blonde hair bouncing freely against her shoulders and back, she leaned back and stared at the dusty ceiling, "If that had been the real me down there, I might have been in some serious trouble."

"Why are you here?"

The sheer amount of mockery clinging to the abomination's taunt dissuaded any further fear from his heart. It bolstered his resolve. It allowed him to turn bodily away from the false corpse, disdain

shimmering in his amber eye. These might be his last moments. He might not live to see another dawn or tear down Xehanort's schemes. But he'd rather perish than grant this barbarous monster the slightest modicum of satisfaction, "Have you come to mock the futility of my efforts?"

"Oh, don't be so down in the dumps!"

Nui couldn't help but wonder why the human was asking so many pointless questions. Was he giving up already? How boring! She might have outmaneuvered his booby trap before walking through the front door, but that was no excuse to quit! After all, if he knew as much as she believed he knew, and she was pretty sure he did, that he wasn't tied to the floor by razor-sharp Life Fibers, slowly yet excruciatingly tortured until screaming for unconsciousness, should have long confessed her true intents, "I'm just here to have fun. That's all."

"Fun, you say?"

DiZ's callous heart spasmed at the abomination's mockery, "If you desire 'fun,' go have it somewhere else!"

"Hmm..."

The noise, reminiscent of someone knowing a dirty little secret yet refusing to tell anyone about it, percolated from the retired Grand Couturier's heart as her legs, swinging playfully back and forth, stopped mid-motion.

"But I like to go where the fun is."

Déjà vu.

It was an annoying feeling. One she didn't enjoy. Not in the slightest. Maybe it was her fault. And maybe it wasn't. But no matter who was at fault for dredging unpleasant memories from the depths of her

heart, hearing the reclusive old human utter something nearly verbatim to that *goddamn* naked ape seriously pissed her off.

"And this place looks like a lot of fun!"

But not enough to affect her friendly smile, "And from what I've heard, you've been doing all sorts of fun things cooped up in this dusty old mansion. Mind sharing some of them with me?"

"I believe you and I have very different definitions of fun... Nui Harime."

An ephemeral burst of anger radiated from Nui's inhuman heart. The utterance of her name, more than anything the badly dressed human could have said, truly tested the limitations of her self-control. And yet she continued smiling, never allowing her feelings so much as leave her chest, "Oh? Figured everything out, huh?"

"Yes. I know quite a bit about you."

DiZ's uncovered eye further narrowed as he cautious circled around the upper balcony, "Ten years ago, you mysteriously appeared upon this world. A few days later, you apprenticed yourself to Elmina less than a week later. Your ability to weave clothing and forge remarkable materials ingratiated yourself with the townspeople and those few individuals capable of traveling between worlds. Yet you distanced yourself from social gatherings. On more than one occasion you rejected the advances of young, foolish men, refusing to acknowledge their feelings. When asked about immediate family, you spoke of a mother and sister yet provided neither names nor appearances."

Every step echoed in the ominous silence pervading the gaps between breathes.

"Two years after your arrival, nearly to the day, you exposed yourself as the monster you truly are."

He understood his remaining time upon the mortal plane was limited. No greater than a few precious minutes. The monster guised under the innocence of a young woman wouldn't allow him to walk away unscathed. Nor breathing. For its darkness pervaded even the darkest shadows. A thick miasma burning with underlying radiance. It was unlike anything he'd witnessed outside the Realm of Darkness. Yet if this was how he would be stricken down, tortured and murdered through no fault of his own, he'd make damn certain the abomination suffered henceforth.

"The scars of that confrontation echo far and wide."

They were something he'd appropriated from Even's laboratory.

But if anything could inflict lasting damage on the monster, allowing someone more skilled than himself to take her down once and for all, it would be them.

"And in the calamitous aftermath, which brought Master Ryuko nearly to the brink of death, you were presumed killed. Yet here you are, alive and well. Wearing garments sewn with the explicit purpose of concealing your presence from those who would undoubtedly find your existence utterly intolerable."

A guttural growl escaped this throat at the monster's unblinking reaction. Nothing. Despite confessing everything he knew about her sordid history, punctuating each word with cold fury and tranquil disdain, her expression hadn't changed. Not in the slightest. Her insufferable smile only broadened, confessing underlying sadism and malevolence that sent shivers racing down his hardened spine.

"You're not human. You're not nothing. No, you're *worse* than nothing. You're a parasite."

He waited until passed beyond a support column, where the blonde-haired monster's field of view would momentarily break, to flip a thumb against the middle pouch strapped upon his waist, "An instinctual creature with no greater purpose than devouring

everything in its path. There's only one reason you'd deign step inside this manor."

Having finally reached the top of the rightmost staircase, DiZ countered the monstrosity's lackadaisical expression by subtly narrowing his visible eye.

"You've discovered my anti-Life Fiber technology and desire nothing more than to destroy both it... and me."

A few different emotions played across Nui Harime's placid features at the human's boisterous proclamation. Mockery. Derision. Amusement. But instead of listening to his pathetic boast, she leaned forward a little more, clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and smirked until her amiable smile reached from ear to ear.

"Nice try."

She had to hand it to the human. His long-winded speech managed to ruin her good mood. How he'd pieced together pretty much everything boggled her mind. And doing it without founding an underground organization dedicated to destroying Ragyo Kiryuin? Well, that should've been impossible. And yet, here he was, standing in front of her having done exactly that! Boy, wasn't *this* an unwanted complication to her master scheme of not bothering Ryuko. Humans simply didn't know when to quit. And older humans always seemed never to know when they should lay down and die instead of meddling with things that didn't involve them.

It was gosh-darn infuriating.

"But word of advice."

Still perched atop the chandelier, she closed her eyes and smiled even wider, sharpened incisors visible between slightly parted lips, "You ~really~ shouldn't try bluffing me. Especially about something as fun and interesting as -"

SWISH!!!

A woman of her reputation didn't survive in a cold and withered world without picking up a thing or two. Like how someone's rousing speech could be nothing more than an amusing distraction while they reached into the brown pouch on their waist. Ryuko wouldn't believe it. Satsuki would claim she was lying. But she really didn't underestimate humans. Not as much as she used to, at least. It was because she'd experienced the ups and downs of thinking herself superior to such a low and insignificant species. That was still true. And nothing in all the worlds could change that. She *hated* humans. She despised almost everything about them. She'd never understand why Ryuko lowered herself to their disgusting level.

But she no longer ~quite~ underestimated their ingenuity.

"Hmm..."

Which explained why she caught the pair of daggers instead of allowing them to sink into her left eye.

"Ultra-hardened Life Fibers, huh?"

The *oh-so-familiar* blades flipped back and forth between her fingers, deep crimson bleeding into a more familiar amethyst. They were shoddily forged. Brittle. The work of a complete amateur who didn't understand the first thing about compressing blankets of Life Fibers while carefully monitoring their energy intake. Too much energy and the hardened Life Fibers become impossible to mold. Too little energy and the Life Fibers turn brittle. And a zigzag stitch instead of the superior stretch bind hem stitch?

No wonder these hardened Life Fiber daggers were several orders of magnitude shoddier than the Scissor Blades.

"I'm guessing you didn't create these."

THUNK!!!

A flick of *her* wrist sunk one dagger into the wall inches from the human's throat.

"Because if you *did*..."

CRUNCH!!!

"... you would've known better than to throw them at me."

Bits and pieces of hardened Life Fibers shattered when she lightly squeezed her fingers. Sure enough, as expected, the craftsmanship was super poor. She could never have shattered the Scissor Blades. Not in a million years. She *hated* Ryuko's dad. But the man knew his way around Life Fibers.

"Scared out of your wits, huh?"

As the shattered remnants of the second dagger twinkled like lavender snowflakes in the orange-red sunset, Nui smirked at the human's terrified reaction towards his last-ditch attack failing so spectacularly, "Well, I suppose it's a good thing I didn't come all this way to ~kill~ you! Or this would've been really awkward!"

"W-What?"

Despite trying his gosh-darn hardest to remain composed and collected, the old coot was taken aback by her generosity. His voice cracked. His amber eye widened. And he involuntarily stepped backwards, unable to comprehend pretty much everything she'd said, "If you didn't come to kill me, why are you here!?"

"You ~already~ know the answer!"

She *moved*. Not too fast. Not too slow. Merely *moved*. Standard stuff, really. To someone like her, it was pretty straightforward and boring. Ryuko could have followed her every step of the way ~and~ reacted quickly enough to send her flying through the nearest wall with a single punch. Or try to, at least, providing she didn't duck out

of the way. Or countered by kicking Ryuko's shin, throwing her sister off-balance long enough to deliver a cute elbow to the solar plexus.

But this arthritic old human?

"I'm here because someone's doing something they REALLY shouldn't be doing."

DiZ's heart plummeted into the pit of the stomach when the abomination's voice whispered over his shoulder, smooth as silk and cutting through the very fabric of sanity.

"But I'm having some trouble finding them."

She wasn't insulted by the man's initial reaction. Not at all. He wouldn't be the first human to trip over their own feet when she decided to wrap things up. Of course, during that time of her life, she'd been Grand Couturier, where it had been more along the lines of 'finish playing around and inform Ragyo Kiryuin' than 'wait patiently until they stopped pissing their pants to explain everything.' But wait patiently she did. For five seconds, both arms clasped behind her back, head tilted ever-so-slightly to the right and broad smile plastered across her beaming face, "Which is why I want YOU to help ME find them!"

"You desire... my help?"

The humans unfounded suspicion meant absolutely nothing to the long retired Grand Couturier.

"Boy, for a genius you sure are slow on the uptake."

Without turning away from the bandaged human who, if given half the chance, would flee into the darkness, making *her* life difficult, Nui reached over and grabbed the dagger sunk hilt-deep into the wall.

"So allow me make it ~real~ simple for you."

Her manicured fingers curled around the crude weapon of destruction's haphazardly constructed hilt. Gripping said blade with all the force of buttoning her evening gown, she gently tugged it free, spraying plaster and wooden splinters through the dusty ambience. And then, in that same swift motion, flipped it around and promptly *crushed* the remaining half of the hardened Life Fiber blades into millions of shimmering purple shards, "Help me find your naughty student and I super pinky promise to not lay a finger on you. Not even if you stupidly decide to start researching Life Fibers."

A ghastly moment passed in complete silence.

And then another.

In that infinity long juncture between heartbeats, DiZ found himself involuntarily gazing into the abyss.

And the abyss stared back.

"It appears I've misjudged you, parasite."

The slightest tremor accomplished those loathsome words. Something the exiled ruler was absolutely certain the abomination noticed. As the adrenaline coursing through his arteries and veins stabilized, he leaned onto the banister. The varnish had long been weathered away, leaving scuffed wood pressing upon his gloved fingers while an infuriated scoff nearly tore through bared lips. He wanted nothing more than to refuse the monster's offer. To throw it back into her face. But that wasn't an option. Because it wasn't an offer. It was a not-so-thinly veiled death threat. Help and live. Refuse and die.

There was no third choice.

Not for him.

"I can see it in your eyes."

Compared to His Majesty and the Keyblade Masters, he was but an exiled scholar possessing the barest powers over darkness. Those two Life Fiber cutting daggers had been his only means of countering the monster's power. And with them destroyed, he was utterly defenseless, "You crave my fallen apprentice's death more than anything, don't you?"

"I wouldn't say 'more than anything'..."

While she found it exceptionally rude to ask a woman what she planned on doing that night, especially if it didn't involve *you*, Nui brushed aside the human's accidental insult, "There are lots of things I need to do. Someone like me is ~always~ busy. But I ~would~ really like to meet your student, if that's what you're asking."

DiZ did not quite know how to respond to such monstrous depravity.

Was this the parasite's true form? An organism guised as a woman while lacking the basic understandings of empathy and morality? Did she have a heart? He could not see. But even the relentless passage of time couldn't dull the memories of that unfortunate young lady. Pleasant and amiable. Friendly to the point Braig thought she was faking it. She'd volunteered to wear several bands of Life Fibers around her right arm. An attempt to further their understanding of how Life Fibers undergo symbiosis or parasitism with their host.

The woman's screams as the thaumavores twisted her body into something monstrous would forever echo in the deepest corners of his guilt-laden heart.

"I see."

He bit the inside of his cheek, copper quickly coating his tongue. The specter of death no longer loomed over his jaded heart. Thus, standing in the darkness, removed from the worlds by his own volition, he observed the monster granting a fake olive branch. One he knew she'd revoke at a moment's notice once he was no longer of any use. Her unnatural perfection disturbed him. No, perfection

wasn't proper vernacular. *Artificialness* better described the truth of the matter. For her flesh was as smooth as porcelain. It lacked blemishes. Not even a scar adorned her face. Blonde hair bounced against the back of her pink coat, far more pristine and voluminous than hair should possibly be.

And her eyes, bright blue with gear-shaped pupils, seemed to penetrate his very soul.

"Tell me something, if you may..."

Birds chirped in the manor's courtyard, singing song of merriment at odds with the terror thrumming through his jaded heart. The immediate threat might have disappeared, but he felt like a poacher approaching a red chocobo's breeding ground. One false move could be his last. The monster might conceal her temper beneath a varnish of affability and childish amusement, but it lurked underneath the surface. A writhing tempest of darkness and unmentionable evil far beyond even Xehanort's ambitions. For while his treacherous apprentice was once human, the parasite standing before him only *mimicked* humanity.

"Were you the creature who arrived upon my world that fateful day so many years ago?"

Nui's smirk broadened, confessing neither truth nor fantasy.

"If you're talking about slicing out that good-for-nothing guard's eye, then yup! I was totally there when it happened!"

His eye narrowed at the roundabout explanation. His skin *crawled* listening to her vivacious amusement. But her lack of empathy disturbed him more than anything. He did not trust the parasite. Not one iota. He knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, if she didn't require his assistance tracking down Even - or Even's Nobody - she would not have bothered offering him any choice.

But her hatred towards his fallen apprentice was genuine.

"Very well. I shall accept your generous offer."

And he could use that hatred to tear down everything Xehanort's created.

"However, my foolish students have gone to great lengths to conceal their movements. Finding them won't be easy. But if you follow my directions, I shall ensure you're able to enact whatever retribution you desire against Even. Use your imagination. Be creative. As long as you lend me your strength in this matter, I care not what you do to him."

The widening smile etched upon the monster's face was almost unnerving.

"Sounds fun!"

Clasping her hands against the small of her back as she watched DiZ's reaction to her pink promise, Nui's expression darkened until the faintest glimmer of razor-sharp fangs peaked through her grinning lips, "After all, there's only so much taboo a woman can handle before she loses all sense of self-control!"

Chapter 15.2

This section was originally part of a much larger update. But it actually works better as a stand-alone update. You can expect the rest soon. And maybe I'll eventually explain where Satsuki obtained her new weapon of choice.

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/8/8d/OP1-02_Satsuki_Kiryuin.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140510203905]

The moniker 'wonderland' truly befitted such a peculiar world.

Apart from fresh dew and hewed lavender assaulting her senses, a strange combination regardless of the circumstances, her first steps had been ordinary. A false peace lasting little more than a heartbeat before reality skewed sideways. Where imagination ran rampant and common sense was thrown to the wayside. Before her heart truly adjusted to the strange realm, she'd stumbled across a white rabbit. Or *the* White Rabbit, as the dilatory creature proclaimed with indignation towards her observation.

Due in no small part to the rabbit's restiveness, their interaction had been brief. A scant handful of questions. She'd barely inquired about Ryuko before the lagomorph denied knowing anything about anyone. It, or *he*, perhaps, had been far more focused on the golden pocket watch relentlessly ticking with abnormal pitch and volume. Phrases such as 'croquet' and 'flamingos' and 'Queen of Hearts' reached her ears between unintelligible outbursts and worried stammering.

Yet by the time she had decided on a course of action, the White Rabbit had scurried deeper into the forest, disappearing between reddish-purple bushes whose branches resembled spiraling shells and curling thorns.

"Hmm..."

Satsuki Kiryuin carefully ran a finger against amalgamated glass.

The wooden berm afforded an excellent vantage of the room, a bizarre mixture of furniture and miscellaneous articles. And for some reason, she stood no taller than an insect. Which was quite an interesting perspective. Even so, her attention remained not on the philosophical ramifications of such peculiar size disparities but the shattered aperture allowing light to warm the bizarre room unfiltered by imperfections and smudges.

"Ryuko didn't do this."

She'd memorized her sister's fighting style. She understood how Ryuko fought... how her sister interchanged magical and physical attacks as easily as one drew breath. Yet Ryuko was not the culprit. Magic *had* been used. But not by her sister. Someone else fought in this room. And judging from the flash-melting along the edges of the shattered window resembling waves caught in a storm, whoever the mage was, they had considerable skill with lightning magic.

"A boy wielding a key..."

An ace of diamonds, unaware she'd been standing on the other side of the towering hedges, spoke of three individuals who defied the Queen of Hearts. One of whom wielded a giant key. It could not have been Ryuko. And neither could it have been Mickey, for the guards would surely have mentioned a mouse, not a boy. Yet try as she might, kneeling on the burnt windowsill, sunlight filtering through shattered glass, warming her face and highlighting motes of dust suspended midair, Satsuki couldn't fathom *who* the guards encountered. Only three people actively wielded the Keyblade - Ryuko, Beatrix and Mickey.

Yet none of them were training apprentices.

She'd *know* if Ryuko decided to take on a student.

["Curiouser and curiouser..."](#)

The mischievous voice carried itself upon the afternoon breeze. It whispered of lunacy and madness. Darkness oozed from its mocking throat. Malevolence concealed itself beneath sardonic inflection. She did not appreciate such arrogance and pretension. It reminded her of someone else. A monster without a shred of humanity. One who would slaughter dozens of people without batting an eye. A monster who knew nothing of empathy, guilt or humanity. An abomination better left forgotten and buried deep within her memories.

"Your manners are atrocious."

Her retort carried neither consternation nor surprise. Annoyance clung to her tongue. Her eyes swiveled from the damaged window towards the rotund purple and pink striped feline several arms lengths down the berm. Or perhaps balancing upon its own head, mouth stretching into a beaming smile and yellow eyes swinging back and forth with the metronomic motion of a grandfather clock's pendulum, was more appropriate, "I shouldn't even bother speaking to you."

"You and I are more alike than different."

She hadn't the slightest inclination pertaining to the cat's origin. And yet the feline's erroneous elicitation sufficiently introduced irritation into her heart, "I sincerely doubt that."

"We've both stared through the looking glass."

Bouncing his disembodied head from one paw to the other, never once doing anything other than smile, the Cheshire Cat appropriated quite a bit of unadulterated amusement from her hasty rejection, "We've seen the jaws that bite, the claws that catch. Beware the Jubjub bird, said the Toves, and shun the frumious Bandersnatch! Through the tulgey wood, the path winds back and forth, roundabout yet straightforward. To go forward is to walk backwards and sideways, left to right hold no meaning. One must make their own path, lest they have quite an unfrabjous day!"

Satsuki attempted following the cat's logic, whatever logic might exist within such vernacular, "Do you speak entirely in riddles?"

"Maybe... or maybe not. Who can say? I certainly can't! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

A sound resembling a *clunk*, then a *thud*, accompanied the cat screwing its head back onto its shoulders, "You're quite the riddle yourself, you know."

"Hm?"

Having sustained her attention, the cat rolled onto his stomach, paws stretched upwards and claws flexing, "Almost as if you're a gimble unable to stop itself! Why, one would believe you're quite mad!"

"What reasoning is behind calling me mad?"

"You must be mad, or you wouldn't be here."

Satsuki's expression settled into an irritated frown. And barely at that. Dealing with Mankanshoku's shenanigans afforded ample resistance to the cat's mannerisms. But it was those terrible memories, waking nightmares of standing in Ragyo Kiryuin's office while feigning interest in whatever monstrous notions whispered into Nui Harime's dark heart, that allowed her to ignore the feline's inane babbling. Did it wish to address her so improperly? Did it desire to speak in riddles full of fictitious lexemes? So be it. She would not encourage it.

Clack!

The slightest hiss escaped her lips as she turned aside, nonchalantly tucking a strand of loose hair behind her ear, "How impertinent. I haven't known you for more than a minute and yet I can state, completely and unequivocally, you are insane."

"We're *all* mad down here, my dear."

The Cheshire Cat guffawed and chortled before taking a deep, dragging breath, "But it seems to me... you, I'm sorry to say... are quite mad yourself. For your frolicking and galumphing through these woods on the brillig has roused the Jabberwock. And he, loathe as I am to admit, is far from the most frabjous fellow."

Something about the feline's tone - or rather, the way in which it spoke - caught Satsuki's attention, "The Jabberwock?"

"Your radiance and incandescence are simply breathtaking."

She was not afforded time to address the Cheshire Cat randomly changing the subject. Accompanied by mocking laughter, yellow eyes bouncing to and for, the rotund feline vanished into the background. It wasn't gone. She could still sense its presence. And for the umpteenth time since the feline graced her with its presence, she was reminded of Nui Harime. An eyebrow quirked upwards. Lips pursed together. And sapphire eyes narrowed, expressing frustration when two sets of pawprints - left and right - marched around either side of her body.

An impossible feat of physical existence followed by the feline reappearing across the berm.

"Say..."

Lounging in the sunlight like a normal cat, the Cheshire Cat's head tilted backwards, "... do you know why a writing desk is like a raven?"

"Because it can produce a few notes. Though they are very flat. And neither are ever put with the wrong end in front."

She never had a childhood.

Her birthdays were somber affairs lacking merriment.

And the depravities Ragyo Kiryuin inflicted upon her heart, body and soul destroyed whatever remained of the girl who gazed upon Junketsu with misplaced wonderment.

But the rotund feline's expression when she answered its convoluted riddle without missing a beat elicited something close to childish delight within her heart.

"'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves. Did gyre and gimble in the wabe. All mimsy were the borogoves."

A peculiar eccentricity clung to the cat's voice as it rolled onto its back, "And the mome raths outgrabe."

"Is there meaning in such nonsense?"

"Meaning? Why, nothing of the sort," the feline tittered, "But... if you... I suppose... were looking for someone... I'd ask... about *her*..."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Why, *her*, of course."

Caught in the sunlight, which danced and irritated her eyes, Satsuki's tone hardened, "Describe her."

"Well... she was here... then there... then everywhere... positively beamish."

The feline seemed intent on stringing her along. But halfway through its roundabout description lacking specific adjectives and nouns, it suddenly gasped, smile momentarily replaced by somber introspection. But just as quickly, everything returned to relative normalcy. Insane joviality plucked upon the cat's lackadaisical heart. A sensation of ignoring the obvious and focusing upon the unnecessary forced Satsuki to continue listen. Yet only after once more balancing its severed, grinning head between its hindlegs, one

front paw the only thing standing between itself and falling onto its neck, the mysterious feline chortled.

"She stopped by yesterday to speak with the boy wielding the key. Or was it tomorrow?"

With the sound of a firecracker, the Cheshire Cat abruptly stopped moving, head falling into place.

"But alas, something seems terribly off."

With neither haste nor celerity to its departure, the feline deigned to once more vanish into the space between worlds. Its pink coloration was the first to disappearing, leaving behind purple stripes surrounding a cat-shaped image. Yet those fleeting visages accompanied razor-sharp fangs pulled into a grinning smile. And deranged chortling, at odds with the feline's blithe tone, drew Satsuki's attention, "The winds of fate are mercurial. That is not dead which can eternal lie. And with strange aeons even death may die. Beware of the threads of fate. For they are carnivorous and most unpleasant!"

Satsuki's breath leapt into her throat.

"How do you know about -"

An obnoxious gasp of laughter from the Cheshire Cat before it faded completely pulled her forth, intent on drawing answers from the beast. But her attempt was violently interrupted as within moments, mere milliseconds of her heeled boots *clacking* against wood, a monstrous silhouette loomed through the broken window.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bO3NORKYJL0>

"GRRRAAAUUUU!!!!"

But as fast as the creature pounced, she reacted faster.

Countless years of experience pushed themselves to the forefront of her focused mind. Memories fighting Heartless... sparring against Ryuko and Beatrix... and striking the presumed finishing blow against Ragyo Kiryuin... contorted her expression into a furious snarl. Lips pulled backwards. Fire danced within azure eyes. As her upper body twisted, one heeled boot slicing a wide arc across the wooden berm, she reached towards the katana strapped to her waist. Calloused yet manicured fingers caressed white sageo with affection afforded to a hated adversary. Orichalcum gleamed in the sunlight. Muscles tightened and flexed. A soft breath escaped her lips.

And with a low *keen* echoing in the furthest depths of her heart, Satsuki unsheathed Muramasa, catching the powerful claws capable of sundering life and death against its midnight black blade.

SHING!!!

Yet it wasn't enough.

Satsuki realized her deficiency almost immediately.

Reality spun and twisted, up and down shifting positions simultaneously with left and right, when the creature's sweeping punch sent her flying across the bizarre room. Sounds and colors mixed together only to separate before her mind could process the bewildering sensory input. Yet Satsuki *never* lost sight of the heinous creature. Furrowed brows and snarling teeth locked onto the monstrosity forcing its way through the shattered window, sending glass and wood raining downwards with force akin to a tumultuous storm.

White-knuckled fingers tightened around Muramasa before relaxing.

A tense exhale steadied her raging emotions.

And when the opportunity finally presented itself, she flipped around, slightly bent her knees and slammed both feet against the wall

above the slumbering doorknob.

SLAM!!!

The vociferous impact shook the room with enough force to momentarily rouse the slumbering doorknob. Muramasa scrapped through paint and wood like butter as the wall buckled underneath her boots. Concave indents expanded from the point of impact. Cracks spread outward. But eventually the cacophony finished, leaving Satsuki Kiryuin spitting in gravity's face. Shoulders gently rising and falling with rhythm confessing mild exhaustion, she stood vertically on the wall, aware but unconcerned with the familiar warmth trickling down her cheeks and chin.

"... the Jabberwock."

Her eyelid twitched as blood dripping from her eyebrow.

She remembered Adelbert Steiner once claiming the worlds were full of dangerous threats. Monsters born of darkness, concealed from the average individual by the thinnest veneer of light. He'd been correct, in more ways than she'd cared admitting. If light and dreams were connected, so were darkness and nightmares. For nothing better described the creature perched upon the berm than a breathing nightmare. Lightning dripped from glistening fangs formed akin to rows of daggers in a maw larger than her body. Bat-like wings accentuated an obnoxiously lithe frame camouflaging immense strength. Clawed fingers capable of rendering stone pulled the rest of the Jabberwock's body into the room.

Burning crimson eyes conveyed intelligence. Not quite sapience but than enough self-awareness enough to plan an ambush at the exact moment she lowered her guard.

"GRRAAAUUUU!!!!"

Darkness exploded across the room alongside the Jabberwock's ear-deafening roar.

"You dare gloat!?"

But such egregious displays of power accomplished little more than hardening her already unyielding resolve.

"Do you believe a scratch is enough to pronounce victory!?"

Muramasa *sang* as she traced a finger down the length of its pitch-black blade. She could certainly see how such an unsightly beast could pose significant trouble to this wonderland's inhabitants. The darkness radiating from its existence was impressive. Yet in response to the animalistic bravado, Satsuki settled into a familiar stance, fingers curling one by one upon the katana's sageo. She could feel it. Muramasa's bloodlust was insatiable. The orichalcum blade sought retribution against the abomination. But she was no slave. She was no mere puppet. With naught but a scornful sneer, the cursed legendary blade's darkness, wafting from the midnight, extinguished, leaving it nothing more than a mere weapon.

"You're nothing more than a rabid animal!"

Disgust clung to Satsuki's throat as she locked eyes with the monstrous creature, "Not even worth sacrificing to Muramasa!"

Faster than a creature its size should have been capable of moving, the Jabberwock leapt across the room, lightning *pouring* from its fang-filled maw.

As anticipated.

"I appreciate you proving my point."

The Jabberwock, due to its limited self-awareness and sapience beyond that of a mere beast possessing power, would undoubtedly bristle at such a lowly taunt. It would seek revenge to quell its animalistic rage. And lacking the higher intelligence necessary to consider strategy and multi-stage planning, anything more than the

most expedient method of achieving its goal would never cross the Jabberwock's heart.

"Now allow me to demonstrate *true* strength!"

With those words, light streamed from her heart. The metaphysical power, born of her experiences and memories and inner strength, poured forth, coalescing around the bloodthirsty katana poised to skewer the approaching Jabberwock. Muramasa shimmered with the radiance of the noon sun. Golden-white light coated the midnight black blade, rendering most of its darkness ineffective.

Click!

Tensing every muscle in her body, for the briefest of moments, caught in the whisper between heartbeats, she sheathed Muramasa, white-knuckled fingers grasping the shimmering blade's hilt.

Her eyes locked upon the approaching beast.

And when the Jabberwock's massive yet lithe frame loomed overhead, claws reaching forward and lightning pouring from its gaping maw, Satsuki drew the stygian blade with enough speed that reality itself rippled in its wake.

"TENRAI KAGAI!!!"

Chapter 15.3

Ryuko,

As you've no doubt realized, I locked the cabinet before departing Lindblum.

If past is prelude, you've probably already used Threadcutter to unlock it.

Why is why I've taken the liberty of throwing away those unhealthy snacks.

You're almost twenty-nine years old, not some rambunctious teenager.

Unique biological circumstances aside, you need to start taking better care of yourself.

But instead of expressing gratitude, you're more than likely cursing up a storm.

However, I'm not present.

Thus, your inevitable diatribe amounts to little more than futile gestures.

Yet you'll undoubtedly do so anyway.

Which, I suppose, makes reprimand pointless.

"Well, a deal's a deal, Genie."

The lamp felt colder. Emptier. Like an ordinary lamp. As if the magic had been sucked out of it. A part of him would miss having Genie around. But he'd promised to free Genie. Even if that meant not

using his third wish to rescue Jasmine, he was a man of his word, "You can do whatever you want. You're free now."

"I'm free... I'm free..."

He'd never expected one of his masters to actually free him. Everything felt strange. The compulsion to grant wishes... to do whatever his master ordered... was gone. In two thousand years, this was the first time someone's altruism proved greater than their greed and avarice. Unable to believe this was happening, Genie's head whipped back and forth, searching for something - *anything* - to prove his theory, "Uh, quick! Wish for something!"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Try the Nile! That's it! Wish for the Nile!"

"But I, uh, *used* my third wish..."

"The monkey! Give the lamp to the monkey!"

Genie's insistence surprised Aladdin, mostly because the freed djinn was visibly wincing. He shared his confusion and bewilderment with Sora and Goofy, the former shrugging while the latter gave him a reassuring thumbs up, before handing the lamp to Abu, who awkwardly squeaked out what sounded like a wish.

"NO WAY!!! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA!"

In the blink of an eye, Genie was bouncing around Aladdin's hideout, ping-ponging off the corners, windows and various other things stashed away from Agrabah.

"Gawrsh, who knew bein' a Genie was so hard."

"You said it."

Nodding along to Goofy's observation, Sora absentmindedly kicked his shoe against the floor. He folded his hands behind his neck,

fingers interlaced through spiky hair. While he was happy for Genie, it sucked none of them could have used the lamp. Three wishes sounded amazing. He could have wished to bring back the Destiny Islands. No! Every world consumed by darkness. He could have rescue Jasmine from Maleficent or whoever kidnapped her. Or found Kairi and Riku and their parents. He could have fixed everything, "Hey, Aladdin. Don't worry about Jasmine, got it? Me, Donald and Goofy will bring her back! You can count on us!"

"Say... that gives me an idea."

The street thief pensively rubbed his chin before snapping his fingers, "Genie! Is there anything you can do to help Sora find Jasmine?"

"Sorry, Al, I'm through taking orders. You want a wish, go find another genie."

With an annoyed scoff, Genie spun around, muscular arms folded across his chest and chin raised haughtily towards the ceiling. Freedom was everything it was cracked up to be. And then some. No more granting wishes. No more compulsion to follow a master's every order no matter how cruel or vindictive. No more phenomenal cosmic power and itty-bitty living spaces. He might have lost a good portion of his power, but he wouldn't exchange freedom for anything in the universe.

"Now, a favor..."

But his fake reluctance didn't last long, "... that's entirely different."

"Well, how about it, Genie?"

As Abu scampered off with the ordinary lamp, tossing it onto the pile of junk they'd collected throughout the city, Aladdin repeated the question, throwing in a lighthearted smile for good measure, "You mind giving Sora a hand?"

"One favor coming right up!"

Fully dedicated to ensuring his first favor - not a wish, he had to remind himself - was one for the record books, Genie cracked his knuckles. All five pairs of them. Magic and light fell towards the ground. And once the tension in his muscles vanished, which was also a new feeling considering he'd been pretty much invulnerable while bound to the lamp, wound up his right arm, stared off into the distance, stuck out his tongue while closing one eye and exclaimed in an overly enthusiastic tone, "Hold on tight! It's going to be a bumpy ride!"

KA-POP!!!

A flash of light shunted everybody - Sora, Donald, Goofy, Aladdin *and* Abu - several miles into the blistering desert.

"Hmm..."

He'd expected *some* performance issues given his newfound freedom, but with another burst of smoke, he was dressed in a tailor suit and vest, sleeves rolled up his arms. Reams of measuring tape hung around his neck. Sharply pressed grey slacks and leather shoes completed the ensemble. All of which were necessary ingredients to properly critique the yellow and orange interstellar vessel upon the sandy dunes with mock derision and disgust, "Horrid! Terrible! Ugh! I wouldn't grace the spring catalogue with such ghastly ugliness!"

"Hey!"

Already sweating from the intense desert heat, Donald's eyebrow twitched, "What's that supposed to mean!?"

"Quiet. I shall have quiet in the gallery."

The freed djinn pretentiously clapped his hands, diverting the irritated mage's attention, "If I am to alleviate the issue, I must have

complete and total silence. Comprendre?"

"Hang on just a -"

Snap!

Donald barely managed uttering half of his question before the gummi ship, Chip and Dale's pride and joy, the flagship of His Majesty's fleet, obtained an entirely fresh coat of emerald green paint and another pair of powerful lasers.

"Awesome!"

"Non! Non! Non!"

Heedless of Sora and Goofy's excitement, Genie snapped his fingers in rapid succession, each *snap* adding or enhancing various weapons, armor and other aspects of the once quaint interstellar vessel. Until finally, after more transformations than was legitimately funny, the blue-skinned djinn stepped backwards and proudly kissed his fingers, "Ah! Yes! Perfect! I present to you... my chef-d'oeuvre!"

"No! Absolutely not!"

Donald seethed. He snarled. His temper threatened to boil over the edges as he *glared* at Genie, who turned the gummi ship into a blue replica of his head, beard and grinning smirk included, "Turn it back this instant!"

"Everybody's a critic."

Putting upon the stage one final display of high-brow contempt, simply because he wanted to and not because Donald lacked appreciation towards fine art, Genie clapped his hands and grunted. There was a *poof*. Then a *bang*. Followed by a series of metallic crunches. And what sounded like an elephant fighting with a whale, "Allow me to present... for a limited time only... for your eyes only... the one and only... the Ifrit!"

"Whoa..."

Sora and Goofy were stricken speechless by the cool-looking crimson and orange ship taking the place of their old gummi ship. A sleek and stylish, armed-to-the-teeth vessel capable of fighting through the thickest hordes of Heartless. Even Donald, who wanted nothing more than for Genie to change His Majesty's ship back to normal, couldn't help but admit how impressive and powerful it looked.

"It's got everything, ladies and gentlemen!"

Now dressed as a gameshow announcer complete with pompadour and cheap blue suit, Genie raised the microphone towards his mouth and gave a beaming white smile, "Powerful cannons! Impenetrable armor! Engines capable of outputting more than three hundred thousand gummi units per second. And last, but certainly not least, individual cup holders and built-in refrigerators. And what better way to pass the time while travelling through the emptiness of space than not one... not two... but *three* copies of my best-selling biography!"

"Huh?"

Sora didn't know when it happened. Or really, *how* it happened. But he was holding a book. Not too thin. Not too thick. But a book with a serious-looking Genie in a crimson cardigan on the cover, "The Magic and Wishes of Genie: A Biography?"

"Well, guys, it's been real swell. But it's time this old genie took a long-overdue vacation."

Answering the rhetorical question with a sly wink, Genie rubbed his hands together. In a whirlwind of magic and smoke smelling faintly of blueberries, he discarded the old-fashioned suit for something more appropriate - a Hawaiian shirt, chocobo-print bathing shorts, flip-flops, sunglasses, a wide straw hat and two overstuffed suitcases packed with several things behind imagination, "Two thousand years inside a lamp can give a guy such an awful crick in the neck."

"You deserve it, Genie."

"Yeah," Goofy watched Genie wrap Aladdin in a bone-crushing hug,
"But if ya don't mind me asking, where ya headin'?"

"Costa del Sol. The *best* resort this side of the Gold Saucer!"

Guffawing as loudly as possible, expressing how *great* it felt to finally be free, Genie blasted off into the sunset, his final thoughts carrying on the desert wind, "Hmm... I wonder if they still have those coconut drinks?"

As for myself?

Considering the circumstances, I suppose my investigation could be more difficult.

The Heartless are an irritating problem, as you can undoubtedly surmise.

However, despite their aggravating persistence, I should return to Lindblum within a week.

Perhaps we can discuss the matter of your diet at such time.

Incidentally, I've stumbled across several of those mysterious creatures you've described in-length.

Thin, sinuous grey bodies with disturbing flexibility, heads emblazoned with familiar symbols,

And human levels of intelligence considering some of them fled after I slaughtered nearly a dozen more.

Compared to the Heartless, these creatures are nothing but annoyances.

Nevertheless, I shall speak with Beatrix and Yen Sid at the first opportunity.

The chair creaked as he leaned backwards as far as physically possible. Which was pretty far considering by the time he propped his feet on the console next to the yoke or whatever Goofy called the steering wheel, only for Donald to immediately smack them down, he was staring at the multicolored stars, nebula and constellations filling the interstellar ocean as if the universe truly was made of water. Caught in his own thoughts and dreams of the past, Sora stared beyond his hazy reflection in the special glass protecting from the encroaching darkness.

And reflected in his bright and innocent eyes, visible for barely a second before vanishing behind a tumbling fragment of rock bigger than Besaid Island, a comet radiating every color of the rainbow streaked across the purplish-green horizon.

"So..."

But there wasn't time for sightseeing. Not now, at least. Blinking rapidly, breaking the concentration keeping his heart focused on how beautiful the ocean between worlds was, Sora folded his hands behind his neck and loudly sighed, "... where do we go now?"

"What do you think?"

Donald's temper hadn't cooled since Agrabah was but a shrinking speck in the rearview mirror. On the contrary, he was still annoyed with Genie's 'adjustments' to the Highwind. Not the Ifrit or whatever. But the heated seats were nice. And the new massage features worked wonders on his cramped muscles. And the chairs were *comfortable*. Even more than his bed. Maybe there were a few things about the upgraded ship he begrudgingly enjoyed. Not that he'd tell anyone. Not unless that person wanted to get zapped with several thousand volts of electricity, "We need to find Ryuko and the king. That means no more stops! We're heading straight for Lindblum! And that's that, understand?"

"But what about Maleficent?"

Across the cockpit, chair reclined and neck massager running at full speed, Goofy's voice *vibrated* alongside the rest of his body, "Shouldn't we, ya know, do somethin' about her?"

"Are you nuts!?"

The short-tempered mage nearly leapt out of his chair, "Don't even joke about something like that!"

"D'ya remember our musketeer oath?"

Goofy's question jolted the wizard's foggy memories. He did, in fact, remember their oath. And that, more than anything, cooled his annoyance. All for one, and one for all. To always help those in need. His heart clenched. And yet, with noticeable reluctance, he folded his arms across his chest and angrily huffed, refusing to so much as acknowledge his old friend's valid but irritating point, "Of course I do! That's why we gotta hurry to Lindblum and tell Ryuko! She's the only one besides Lulu who can defeat Maleficent."

"Donald's right."

Gazing at the stars and planets passing over their gummi ship as it flew through the vast emptiness of space, Sora's expression shifted into something resembling a frown, "We were lucky. Really lucky. Maleficent's strong. If she wanted us dead, I'm not sure we could've stopped her."

As hard as he tried forgetting what happened back at the Cave of Wonders, he couldn't. And that bothered him more than anything. The Keyblade was powerful. It could do amazing things. It could unlock doors, seal keyholes and destroy Heartless. And thanks to Donald and Goofy, he'd learned a thing or two about magic and fighting. But against someone whose heart was as dark and twisted as Maleficent's, Keyblade or not, he wouldn't stand a chance.

"On the other hand, she's probably the one who kidnapped Jasmine. And we promised Aladdin we'd save Jasmine."

And just like that, any good will he'd earned by agreeing with the feathered wizard was immediately squandered.

"Were you listening to anything I -"

"So, if we're gonna save Jasmine, we need to find Ryuko. And that means heading straight for Lindblum!"

Donald's protests devolved into annoyed squawking in the few seconds it took his mind to understand Sora was still agreeing with him. Even if the Keyblade wielder did so in a rather roundabout and meandering fashion, "That's what I just said!"

"Yeah," Sora agreed, only he *really* didn't sound like he was agreeing, "But I'm guessing the Ifrit's new engines can take us there in half the time and twice as fast, right? What are we waiting for?"

"First of all, let's get one thing straight - this is the *Highwind*, not the *Ifrit*. Got it!?"

Thoroughly annoyed by the Keyblade wielder's insistence on referring to His Majesty's gummi ship by that atrociously awful name, Donald's right eyebrow twitched, "Call it that again and no matter what Goofy says, I'm dropping you off on the next world and never looking back!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

His eyebrow twitched several more times, "Do you even know how to *get* to Lindblum?"

"Of course!"

Sora didn't feel the slightest bit guilty about lying to Donald. Well, lying was a wrong choice of words. He knew where to go. He just didn't know *where* to go, "Ryuko always said the world was right next door to Burmecia and Alexandria!"

"And do you know *where* those places are?"

"Uh..."

Faster than the Keyblade wielder-in-training could come up with a legitimate-sounding excuse, Donald yanked the controls away from Sora, "That's it! Move over! I'm driving!"

Ryuko, I've recently stopped by a world known as Wonderland.

It's a rather - shall we say - peculiar realm, as if forged from a young child's imagination.

The Cheshire Cat. Queen of Hearts. White Rabbit. The Carpenter. The Walrus.

A few of the world's denizens mention a teenage boy wielding a giant key - a Keyblade.

Such a thing seems impossible. Only three Keyblade wielders are active at this time.

You, Beatrix and Mickey.

Yet if these sources are speaking the truth, a fourth Keyblade wielder exist.

One of pure heart and conscious, if his desire to save a girl named Alice are true.

Which leads to another, far more important question.

Have YOU visited Wonderland?

I ask because a peculiar feline mentioned 'carnivorous and unpleasant threads of fate.'

Only one thing comes to mind - which I will not write down.

If you've visited this world, you can ignore my worry as misplaced paranoid.

But if you haven't stepped foot upon Wonderland?

Reason suggests, no matter how impossible, an annoying problem has once more resurfaced.

"ZZZ... ZZZ... ZZZ..."

Wwwwaaoaooooaoo!!

"What!? What!?"

Donald's eyes snapped open, resigning his quiet dream of picnicking with Daisy to quickly fading memories, when the gummi ship lurched forward, then backwards before rolling side to side, "What happened? Did we hit something?"

"No! I don't know! I mean, I don't think so."

A loud crash accompanied the upgraded autopilot, programmed with Lindblum's exact coordinates in the Realm of Light, turning itself off when Sora yanked on the controls. Memories of Riku's embarrassing near-crash filtered through Sora's heart. And with his knuckles bleeding white, he breathed deeply, heart beating a mile a minute, when the gummi ship came to a harsh stop, nearly knocking Donald out of his seat and finally rousing Goofy from his own dreams.

"Mornin', Donald. G'morning, Sora."

As the last kinks worked themselves out of his shoulders, the royal knight scratched his temple and looked around, "Say, what happened? Did we miss Lindblum?"

"We're not there yet, you big palooka!"

Only by the strength of his unfathomably infinite patience did Donald merely scoff at Goofy's laziness. The things he put up with. For a guy who could spot the proverbial needle in a haystack, Goofy somehow always missed the obvious. It was impossible. And yet, his friend always did it. But one look at the Highwind's console pushed all

thoughts of chastising his friend until *after* they reached Lindblum. Because at the moment he examined the shield strength and armor integrity, wondering what Sora could have possibly hit during the fifteen minutes he got some much-needed shut eye, *everything* shook.

Wwwwaaoaooooaoo!!

"Whoa!"

Sora's jaw nearly hit the ground. And it wasn't because of the gummi ship violently shaking around them. Or the radar going haywire. Or several other instruments beeping. The thing was huge! It was big! He'd never seen anything quite like it! Thoughts collided inside his heart. Too many questions to count filled his mind. But one question above the others stood out.

"Is that a..."

"... whale?"

Coincidentally finishing Sora's train of thought, Goofy watched the majestic yet out-of-place aquatic creature swim through the ocean of stars, "The universe sure is full of interesting stuff. But what's a whale doin' all the way out here? Do ya think it's lost or something?"

"Oh dear! Oh my, oh dear, oh my!"

Tucked away in Sora's hoodie, Jiminy Cricket gulped at the monstrous beast lurking in the darkness, "It's Monstro!"

"Monstro?"

Wwwwaaoaooooaoo!!

Sora flinched when the giant whale - Monstro, he reminded himself - sung for the third time, visibly shaking the Highway, "What's that?"

"He's a whale of a whale, and vicious besides!"

Anger and annoyance allowed Donald to ignore the giant whale's third booming note, which shook the entire cockpit like an earthquake. Grabbing his hat and staff off the floor where they fell, he glared at the unwanted creature, hoping to simply *think* away the monstrous irritation, "What does it want with us?"

"I don't know!"

Jiminy stammered, "But we better think of something, and fast, or who knows what might happen to us."

Wwwwaaoaooooaoo!!

When the giant whale corkscrewed through the infinite darkness lurking between worlds, light and shadows clinging to its barnacle-covered blubber, Goofy gasped, "It's comin' back!"

"Get us out of here, Sora!"

"I'm trying!"

Sora latched onto the controls with both hands and *twisted*, yanking the ship sideways only for Monstro to swim *ahead* of them, turn around and barrel towards them with its massive mouth wide open.

"Too late! He's going to swallow us!"

There's one more thing I wish to write.

We grew up on a world far different from most.

Magic, light and darkness were nothing more than fairy tales and physical concepts.

Creatures like the Heartless did not exist. Not until the bitter end, at least.

And yet you and I - our friends and departed loved ones - achieved feats most would consider impossible.

Our childhoods were anything but normal.

Our family had issues, more than perhaps any other family.

Yet through our individual strengths,

Through the confidence and support of our friends,

Whether or not we desired their company,

We persevered.

Those chains of memories, pleasant or otherwise terrible, forged us into the people we are today.

Are there things I desperately wish to change?

Of course.

But if that were possible, would our world still have suffered such a nightmarish fate?

And if not, if we remained ignorant of the truth, would the fates of those our hearts touched have changed?

"That'll be twenty-five munny!"

"Do you accept Gil?"

"Of course, kupo! The only thing we don't accept is GP!"

"Very well."

A translucent blue concoction with the viscosity of maple syrup and tasting faintly of afternoon breezes. That was a potion. That was the surprisingly cheap resource capable of healing wounds and, depending upon their potency, bring one back from the cusp of death. Pocketing the slightly warm yet strangely cool vial in her front right pocket, careful not to disturb the cork etched with Mognet

Central's emblem, Satsuki wondered if a single potion was enough. Perhaps she should buy two. And a few ethers to restore vigor and counter mounting exhaustion.

"Will that be all, kupo?"

Unlike her sister, she didn't have the luxury of counting on Life Fibers to heal damage. She was completely human. If stabbed through the stomach, without proper medical or magical aid, she would most likely die.

"No."

She couldn't help but wonder why a moogle would set up shop in the middle of such an enchanted yet annoying place. No one visited this wonderland. There was little, if any, traffic through the Lotus Forest aside from the world's off-kilter inhabitants. Heartless manifested from the shadows with disturbing frequency. Monsters ambushed unwary travelers. And yet Mogtaka, for the moogle took pride in introducing herself, nevertheless spread her various wares and items upon a blue eiderdown stitched with Mognet Central's insignia or the overstuffed knapsack causing her diminutive body to sink through the blanket into the dirt.

"There's one more thing."

Mako would probably find everything about this image utterly adorable.

"I'd also like to mail a letter."

Reaching into another pocket, she grasped the parcel sealed only minutes prior to entering the relatively peaceful glade, "Will standard postage be sufficient?"

"Um, well..."

Mogtaka fidgeted.

Some moogles - *most* moogles - had no problem giving their customers bad news. But not her. She hated giving bad news. But business was business. And she needed the business more than anything, "I'm awfully sorry, kupo, but this world is way outside the normal shipping lanes. Delivering your letter is going to cost a rather large surface. I really wish I didn't have to, kupo, but as solemnly decreed by Good King Moogle Mog the XV, no exceptions for anyone, kupo! Not even for someone as famous and moogle friendly as you, Miss Satsuki!"

To her credit, Satsuki barely arched an eyebrow, "You know of me?"

"Not me *personally*..."

She might not have been there when it happened, but *every* moogle knew about Satsuki and her sister, the great Keyblade Master Ryuko. Two sisters who fought side-by-side against the Heartless, rescuing both Good King Moogle Mog the XV and Artemicion from a particularly ferocious beast, "... but every moogle worth their pom-pom knows your name!"

Satsuki afforded herself the slightest of smirks, "How much do I owe?"

"Um, let's see," Mogtaka scratched the top of her head, "I think it was... oh, I remember now! It's one hundred Gil! I... um... I know that's a lot of money, but - "

"No, it's quite alright."

Removing the requisite postage surcharge from her pocket, Satsuki paused mid-count. How could she have forgotten something so important? Was it still there? She had little doubt anyone other than that feline would approach the aftermath of their battle. Still, time was of the essence. And so, with the path forward burning in the depths of her heart, Satsuki's hand reached back into her pocket.

"Oh, I'll need something delivered to Mognet Central."

Her fingers worked quickly. Despite the pen being nearly out of ink, she scribbled out the location, "Once you're finished, ship it to the same address as on the letter."

"Huh?"

Mogtaka barely read over the amazingly well-written note before her pom-pom and wings stood straight up, "A taxidermist? What did you kill?"

"The Jabberwock."

"J-Jabberwock!?"

Despite carrying more items, knick-knacks and accessories than her own body weight, Mogtaka leapt off the ground, "Y-You killed the J-Jabberwock?"

"It wasn't difficult."

As underwhelming as it sounded, it was the truth. Brushing an errant strand of hair out of her eyes, Satsuki stared far into the distance, where the vicious beast's corpse slowly cooled in a growing pool of greenish-blue blood, "The Jabberwock was nothing more than an exceptionally powerful wild animal. It attacked me. I fought back and slayed it. And now it shall become an exhibit in the Lindblum Museum of Natural History."

"K-Kupo!!!"

Forgive me, Ryuko.

I did not write this letter to dredge up painful memories of the past.

I'm merely expressing my thoughts and personal beliefs.

A diametric war between light and darkness forever wages inside the heart.

At the slightest moment of weakness, we might succumb to darkness's power.

Or naively surrender to light's blinding radiance.

The brightest lights cast the longest shadows, after all.

In the end, we are not perfect.

Humanity is the furthest thing from perfect.

Yet that imperfection makes us strong.

But no matter what may happen, no matter who or what stands in our way.

Even if we must venture forth into darkness itself, know that I shall always stand by your side.

We'll approach the dawn together.

You.

And me.

Satsuki

P.S. I'm having something delivered to our home. If I'm not back when it arrives, inform Captain Basch and Regent Cid.

Chapter 15.4

Deception: *One who speaks the truth holds no lies. A lie takes imagination. A lie requires focus. Why waste effort on a lie when the truth is thousand-fold more devastating?*

~Maleficent~

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/5/52/Shadow_Sora_02_KH.png/800px-Shadow_Sora_02_KH.png]

It felt like someone stabbed his heart with a knife and then twisted the blade for good measure.

"Damn it!"

This had to be a nightmare. Nothing more than a bad dream! Any moment now, he'd wake up, safe and sound. Everything would be fine. Everything would be alright. Sora, Kairi and everyone would be waiting at the beach with Tidus's dad for the 'traditional' naming of a new ship. He'd spend the whole day fishing. And by the time night fell, this dream would be nothing more than a forgotten memory.

And yet, no matter how many times he told himself those words, they changed nothing.

"Kairi's heart can't be gone!"

Leaning against his forearm, teeth clenched and mind reeling, Riku reared back his other arm and punched the wall. Over and over again, he angrily smashed his knuckles against the undeserving wall, eyes steadily blurring until he couldn't recognize his own reflection in the mirror. Blood dribbled between his trembling fingers. His entire hand hurt as every impact widened the spiraling cracks spreading across the dusty green paint. But he didn't care. He

couldn't find the energy to care about something like that. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to say her name.

And it *hurt* realizing he'd never see Kairi open her eyes again.

"It... it just can't."

The words he wanted to say more than anything in the universe refused to come out. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't do it. He sputtered. He stammered. And after one final punch, every ounce of frustration and torment sending his bloodied knuckles through the plaster to the wood and stone lying underneath, Riku winced.

"Sora..."

He could still see Kairi's smile. He could still hear her laughing at Tidus's bad jokes. He still remembered fleeing across town with Kairi and Sora after she accidentally kicked a blitzball into Ryuko's face. For a moment, just long enough to realize the sadness and darkness lifted, Riku smiled. A moment of levity and happiness shattered when, no longer able to stand under his own power, lacking the energy and desire to punch the wall one final time out of frustration, he collapsed onto his bed.

"... how could you forget about Kairi!?"

Venomous anger tainted his heart as white-knuckled fingers latched onto his knees. He couldn't understand how grabbing that princess helped Carabosse find Kairi. Doing something like that was *wrong*. His heart screamed it was wrong. He should have helped Sora fight that evil genie. Maybe it was how her mouth always twitched whenever he mentioned Ryuko's name. Or the time that guy - Pete or whatever - almost called her a different name, thinking nobody was around to hear them. Or those other people coming and going in the middle of the night. Carabosse was hiding something from him. Who was she? How did she *really* know Ryuko and Satsuki and everyone else?

He didn't know.

But even if she had a secret or two, Carabosse had kept her word. She'd found Kairi without asking for anything in return.

"If you weren't too busy making new friends and having -"

Guilt welled inside his heart. He couldn't do it. He couldn't blame Sora. Not for this. Not for anything. Sora was his best friend. When that chocobo rampaged through town after Tidus and Wakka disturbed its nesting ground on some stupid dare, Sora had been the one to push him out of harm's way. Unable to square *that* Sora, who broke his left arm and shoulder in three different places yet blamed himself for not being faster, with the stranger who laughed and cheered back on that other world, Riku angrily grimaced.

"We could've saved her..."

He bit his cheek until the taste of copper filled his mouth, "... we could've protected Kairi from the Heartless."

"The heart that is strong shall wield the Keyblade."

His heart skipped a beat at the familiar voice resonating from the thickening darkness in the corner of his room.

"Such is a fundamental rule of existence."

Don't Lose Your Heart

"I can't believe Sora almost beat me."

Walking along the shore stretching behind Besaid Island, water lapping at his bare feet, Riku grabbed a piece of half-rotten driftwood sticking out of the sand.

"He must've been practicing."

The race had been close. A lot closer than expected. For the first time in forever, Sora actually managed to stay on the zip line. He'd expected the guy to fall onto his butt. Like he always did. But for once in their lives, Sora hadn't tripped over his own feet. And thanks to underestimating Sora's ability to not fall down, he'd won the race by the skin of his teeth. A couple more seconds and they'd be naming their fishing raft 'Excalibur' instead of 'Ragnarok.'

"At least 'Excalibur' wasn't half-bad. Heh, better than half the stuff Sora usually comes up with."

Another wave crashed against the beach. Foamy water lapped at his bare feet, clinging to his ankles and filling his nose with the familiar smell of decaying seaweed as he gazed across the horizon. He had to admit, Excalibur was awesome. Not that he'd tell Sora or Kairi or anyone else. Naming their raft after Alexandria's royal treasure? A sword Ryuko claimed could stand against the Keyblade and slice apart darkness with a single swing? No wonder Sora was trying so hard to win.

"Tch, why didn't I think of that?"

"You've seen the door."

"What the -?"

He never heard them coming. The voice was so sudden... so unexpected... he nearly leapt into the shallows, "Who's there!?"

A soft breeze brushed against the back of his neck. It felt colder than normal. As if something sucked out the warmth. The sun was already dipping below the trees slicing Besaid Island down the middle. But he saw them. Someone. Something. They were hunched beneath the finish line, darkness absorbing their hooded brown robe. He couldn't see their face. And yet when they turned slightly to the left,

perpetual darkness and shadows radiating from within that hood, he felt his heart skip a beat.

"What do you want?"

"Only one whose heart is worthy of the Keyblade possesses the capacity to open it."

"The... Keyblade?"

He repeated the question. Not once, but twice.

"Alright, Sora, you got me."

Man, on man, did he feel like an incredible idiot. It was one thing to fall for a good prank. But to fall for one of the oldest tricks in the book? Heh, no wonder Sora hadn't been so upset about losing the race. A prank like this took time and effort. Especially with an admittedly eerie and unsettling consume like that. Cryptic warnings and threats? An ominous and quiet figure 'popping' out of nowhere? It was good. It was goddamn good. It would have been perfect if Sora hadn't gotten ahead of himself and mentioned the Keyblade.

"Nice consume."

Waving over his shoulder, he turned around and laughed, "Now, come on. You know how Kairi gets when we don't follow her -"

The hooded figure was standing in front of him.

"How did you -"

"This world has been connected... tied to the darkness... soon to be completely eclipsed..."

"You're not Sora."

He could no longer hear birds chirping. The waves crashing against the beach sounded distant, "Who are you? What do you want with

me?"

"The mind can ignore it... the body can reject it... but the heart cannot hide the truth."

"The truth?"

"You've been selected. Your heart proved worthy," the man, at least Riku thought it was a man and not some heartless monster, stood unmoving in the breeze, "Yet Ryuko foolishly believes you're unworthy of such power. She limits your potential, preventing you from achieving that which you were destined to wield."

"How do you know Ryuko?"

"She and I were acquainted... once upon a time."

There was no reason to believe the guy actually knew Ryuko. Almost everyone in town knew her. Heck, from her stories, she was known far and wide throughout the universe. A famous hero. Or something. But curiosity kept his feet rooted to the sand, water and foam sticking to his ankles, "Just because you can throw around a few names doesn't mean I believe you."

"Whether you believe me or not is irrelevant."

The person was fading away. Literally. They turned transparent before his eyes, darkness giving way to afternoon light while their voice lingered on the wind.

"Open the door. Inside you shall find the truth your heart seeks."

Don't Lose Your Heart

"YOU BASTARD!!!"

Anger carried him forth. Fury guided his movements. Swift and steady, honed upon the hooded figure's heart, Riku swung Soul Eater, "You're why Kairi lost her heart!"

A loud *keen* screeched against his heart as enchanted mithril sliced through the wall, leaving behind a glowing wound radiating darkened flames. The jagged contours of the infection oozed corruption. Darkness trailed behind Soul Eater, clinging to the falchion's razor-sharp edge. Yet it was only after he stopped swinging, one sneaker propped against the wall and the other stomping upon the floor, did his narrowed eyes abruptly widen.

"What!?"

That's when he heard the mocking laughter.

"You sought the truth."

Standing opposite of where they'd arrived, the figure, whoever they were, craned their shadowed visage towards the window above his bed, staring at the star-filled skies above the castle. Orange and red danced upon the horizon akin to dying flames, illuminating the once proud bastion of light and hope within deepening purples and blues, **"And so, you opened the door, escaping the tedium of your monotonous existence."**

"Is that right?"

Ryuko must've left a permanent impression on his heart.

"Well then, how *rude* of me..."

Because he'd gone straight from being blinded by anger and hatred to tranquil fury faster than it took his mind to process the change.

"So, why don't you start by telling me your name..."

He knew he should be furious. He should be angry. After all, a few seconds ago he was trying to stab the guy through the heart. Assuming he *had* a heart, that was. But now? Now he simply raised Soul Eater into an increasingly familiar and comfortable stance, fingers curling one by one around its handle. This asshole tricked him into opening the door. He was the reason their parents were gone. Why their world had been destroyed and consumed by the Heartless. The monster standing in front of him was the reason Kairi's heart was missing.

"... that way, I know whose ass I'm kicking!"

"Who I am is irrelevant. The question you should ask yourself is - do you wish to save your friend?"

Riku flinched. Just for a moment, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"To retrieve the girl's heart, to restore that which has been lost, you must become stronger."

It hit him like a sucker-punch to the stomach. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. How the hell did this bastard know anything about Kairi? Did he know opening the door would lead to everything that happened? Riku *wanted* nothing more than to make the freak suffer. It might not bring Kairi back. It might not change anything about what happened to their world. But it would make him feel better. Like he accomplished *something* important. But instead, he swallowed the bile rising up his throat, nauseated by what he was about to say.

"What do you mean 'stronger'?"

"Do you believe Ryuko was born as strong as she is?"

"Huh?"

"You've seen her as she is - strong, confident, powerful. An infamous Keyblade Master known far and wide. One whose strength begets little challenge," the figure's voice echoed and warbled, baritone overtures mixing with nauseating cynicism, **"But that was not always the case. Once upon a time... before the worlds were connected... Ryuko was much like yourself. Weak. Helpless. Powerless. Seeking something her heart desperately desired yet lacking the means of accomplishing."**

"Ryuko? Weak?"

Riku didn't lower his guard. Not even for an instant, "Sorry, but I'm not buying it."

"Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them."

Laughter resonated throughout the darkness as the mysterious figure's sleeves rustled in an unfelt breeze, **"Ryuko came from a world much like your own. Isolated. Unaware. Then the darkness came. Then her world was lost to the shadows. Yet she did not wallow in despair. She refused to accept her weaknesses. She refused to allow any other worlds share her world's unfortunate fate. Through strength of heart and unwavering conviction, she obtained the Keyblade. Heh... That much you know, of course. She's regaled you with such imaginative stories of her beginnings more than once. But would you like to know the truth?"**

"Truth?"

The halted question clung to his tongue like syrup, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Every heart contains darkness," the cloaked presence's voice rose several decibels as they weakly motioned towards the further corner of his bedroom, where the shadows appeared thicker, **"Yet darkness is neither good nor evil. It is simply the heart's true**

essence. Nothing more. Nothing less. To deny darkness is to deny one's true nature. Ryuko understood this. Due to her excusable ignorance born of isolation and confinement, preconceptions did not permanently tarnish her heart. She did whatever she felt was necessary to regain that which she cherished above all else."

"Ryuko did..."

Riku stopped himself before the question finished leaving his heart, "Get real! No way would Ryuko accept the darkness! She's not like that! If she did, Satsuki and Mako and everyone else would've -"

"The Keyblade is drawn towards those with strong hearts..."

Arrogance clung to the figure's voice as, for the briefest of moments, something moved beneath their tattered brown robe, **"... and Ryuko's heart stands amongst the strongest. But that same unstoppable strength's induced nearly irreparable damage. You fear the darkness. You fear losing your heart to the shadows. And because of that... because of Ryuko's influence... the Keyblade which should have been yours by inheritance has moved onto another heart."**

"Another...?"

It took less than a second to piece everything together, "You're talking about Sora?"

"A dull, ordinary boy. One who's forgotten his friends," the figure chortled, their voice warbling within the shadows, **"Do you think Ryuko would wish the Keyblade in such incapable hands?"**

Riku frowned but said nothing.

"To regain that which you lost... to obtain the power necessary to save your friend's heart... you know what must be done."

As their first encounter back on Besaid Island, the hooded figure faded into the darkness, swallowed by the shadows until nothing remained but their baritone voice.

"Seek strength. The rest will follow."

He didn't bother waiting for the monster to finish spewing cryptic nonsense before lashing out. Soul Eater exploded from his fingers, sinking halfway into the wall before the bastard's voice completely vanished. At least, that's what he wanted to do. But it was nothing more than a dream born of imagination. Teetering on the edge of madness, caught between guilt and anger, both at himself and the person who ruined his life, Riku stared vacantly at the ground, teeth clenched into a trembling snarl.

"The strength... to save Kairi...?"

His heart skipped a beat at the question. With memories of tears glistening in the corners of his eyes, he grabbed his forehead, fingers clenching handfuls of silver hair. He didn't want to believe the bastard. He *refused* to believe him. That heartless monster tricked him into opening the door. He was the reason Kairi would never wake up. Their parents, friends and everyone back home were gone. He'd never see them again. He'd never be able to apologize to Kairi for being unable to protect her.

"... always trust your heart..."

A shiver raced down his spine as he found himself repeating one of Ryuko's lessons. Since his earliest memories of Ryuko visiting the islands, he'd cherished her words. He'd kept her lessons close to heart. Protect your friends. No matter how impossible they might be, don't let anything stand in the way of your dreams. And even when everything looked bad, trust your heart. Believe in yourself even when others refuse to believe in you.

"What do I do?"

He stared at his hand, opening and closing it several times before grimacing, "Will the Keyblade really help save Kairi?"

"Ah, please, do forgive my intrusion..."

Maleficent knocked thrice, manicured fingers pushed open the door to Riku's chambers, where the naïve child had sequestered himself upon seeing his friend's unfortunate fate. She despised behaving as if she cared about him. But it was necessary. Every action and decision crucial if she were to obtain the unlimited power and knowledge within Kingdom Hearts while destroying every last trace of those despicable parasites from the face of existence.

She barely crossed the threshold before something caught her interest.

The factitious concern stretching painted lips into an almost matronly smile cracked. Amber eyes swept towards the corner nearest the boy's desk, focusing upon where the darkness and shadows were strongest. With nothing more than conscious intent and the slightest flexing of her manicured fingers, Maleficent pierced the metaphysical veil separating Hollow Bastion from the darkness between worlds.

She could have sworn someone was watching them.

"When you stormed away, I couldn't help but shoulder some responsibility."

As the frozen moment caught between two eternities restarted, spurious worry veiled irritation and outright animosity. The tempest within her heart quelled. Her fingers relaxed and allowed her staff to slip forward. Amber eyes softened. Yet her mind remained focused. Attentive to every minute detail. If someone managed to intrude upon this hallowed domain without drawing attention to themselves, it implied them capable of overpowering her magic. But the only creatures capable of doing so were those contemptible parasites. Yet she was quite certain Ryuko hadn't stumbled upon the unstable remnants of this world.

That contemptible woman was anything but subtle.

If Ryuko was here, she'd already know about it.

"No one should suffer such a cruel and unnecessary fate..."

Masking her malicious intent, she shifted her expression into something resembling genuine guilt. As if she truly believed she, herself, was to blame for anything. Factitious empathy guided manicured fingers onto Riku's stiffened shoulders, enabling her to *feel* the darkness tormenting his heavy heart. And drawing her presence downwards until she stood instead of loomed over the youth whose once innocent eyes confessed ample pain and suffering, Maleficent masked her excitement beneath a stone façade.

"... but there may still exist a way to make things right."

Without batting an eye, Riku not-so-gently shoved the statuesque fairy's hand off his shoulder, "What do you *really* want?"

"I wish nothing more than to help."

"I *seriously* doubt that."

Maleficent's jawline clenched at the impertinence. The flagrant disrespect roiled her blackened heart. If the boy's usefulness was not yet finished, she would have skewered his corpse upon pillars of earth. His mind would have frozen mid-thought. His bones and muscles would burn eternally in hellfire while his lungs filled with water. Flesh would painfully atrophy only to immediately regenerate thousands upon thousands of times until his sanity shattered. And when she was finished, unable to extract any further pain and suffering, a long and arduous process of which she'd derive immense pleasure extending as long as physically possible, she'd feed his heart to the Heartless teeming beneath the castle.

"If you insist."

Her false dejection masked the tumultuous darkness staining the halls of Hollow Bastion. An ancient fury reaching the furthest shadows of the once hallowed world, "Then I suppose you shan't require my assistance recovering your friend's heart."

"Wait!"

She didn't wait for an answer. Not that she needed to. It would come. Despite its so-called strengths, the heart was a weak and fragile existence. The slightest push could shatter such a furtive existence. As the mistress of all evil, she was quite experienced manipulating the hearts of men and women. Darkness made things easier. But she did not reach the pinnacle upon which lesser beings kneeled at the hems of her robes by relying upon darkness. No. On the contrary, darkness was nothing more than a weapon. A means to control the creatures born from fallen hearts.

Unable to hear the thoughts inside her heart, the poor boy waited until she was halfway into the corridor before desperation overwhelmed his arrogance, "Kairi's heart can be saved?"

"I wish nothing more than to help."

Turning aside with deliberate slowness, the regality of her stride, something no amount of faux empathy could obscure, concealed the faint limp affecting the entire right side of her body. A wound which elicited visceral hatred. A deep-seated antipathy towards that contemptible woman. But the naïve boy saw none of this. His numbed senses witnessed painted lips colored the same shade as blooming roses purse into a frown. He saw guilt. And he heard someone beyond his existence lower herself to his level, "Which is why I'm here. I might have found something useful. A means of restoring your friend's heart."

"You have?"

"See for yourself..."

With the callow youth begging for information, Maleficent nonchalantly reached into the space between worlds. Emerald magic curled around her fingers, caressing manicured digits akin to beryl flames. Yet she waited until the image of a slumbering puppet, jointed knees held against its wooden chest, imprisoned within pulsing walls of flesh and viscera enraptured Riku's attention before continuing, "An ordinary puppet carved by an ordinary man. Yet one granted life and consciousness. And quite possibly a heart."

"Granted?"

As anticipated, Riku latched onto one particular word, the delusional boy's voice nearly cracking from the pain wracking his turmoiled heart, "What do you mean granted?"

"Do you remember what I am?"

The realization in the boy's eyes said enough.

"This intriguing puppet was granted consciousness by another fairy."

Painted lips marred by a fading scar quirked into an intrigued smile as she strutted towards the window, whereupon she gazed at the thousands upon thousands of Heartless mingling across the shattered world. A world controlled by her. A world she'd scatter into the abyss if it meant grasping Kingdom Hearts between her fingers, "One whose power is far beyond anything I've seen in quite some time."

"How?"

"I'm not quite certain."

She was patient. Far too patient, as some unintelligent fools would profess. But in the grand scheme of things, she stood upon the precipice of absolute power while they groveled at her feet, "And that's why I want you to bring me the puppet. If I could simply

examine the magic animating its existence, it might be possible to save your friend."

"You can do that!?"

"Yes."

It appeared frighteningly trivial. No more difficult than drawing breath. And perhaps, to one such as herself, translocation magic was nothing more than second nature. Nimble fingers caressed the emerald jewel perched atop her staff, manipulating strands of magic and reality far beyond the boy's ignorant heart could possibly comprehend. And as the hazy smoke dissipated, displaying an expansive region of the distant cosmos, she took stock of the massive beast gliding through the ocean of stars as easily as if it were swimming through water.

"What is that thing?"

"What else? A whale, of course."

Chortling ever-so-slightly at the question, she waved her hand, zooming the image until it showed an animated marionette running through the whale's innards, "The marionette has been swallowed by this infamous leviathan. A beast known only as 'Monstro.' Finding it should be simple. Of course, you undoubtedly possess reservations against kidnapping. If you desire another means of restoring your friend's heart, I shan't force you along this path. However, I'm afraid we might not have much time..."

"What!?"

She found the boy's terrified expression positively *enrapturing*.

"One's body cannot exist without the heart."

And yet ugliness etched her scarred façade. Her tattered robes billowed as she turned aside, focusing on the darkening horizon,

perpetual annoyance twisting her features into what could only be call irritation. Manicured fingers tightened.. The pain clinging to her injured leg flared. But not a trace of turmoil nor frustration clung to her forked tongue.

"Not for long."

Only one whose heart lacks darkness can find another. Those were the exact words she'd told Riku when he asked about the princess. But that was only the start. Such an advantageous technique required a catalyst. An object connecting the heart of one who seeks with that of who they desire. Something held near to heart. An embroidered shell bearing weathered and eroded features, for example. If the girl's heart had been ordinary, the spell would have failed, necessitating explaining to the poor boy that sometimes magic cannot solve one's problems.

But the forbidden technique *did* succeed.

Her theory was correct.

The girl was the seventh princess necessary to unlock the path to Kingdom Hearts, matching Ansem's description of a young child with violet-blue eyes, dark red hair and a heart with neither trace of darkness nor inherent malice.

Yet her missing heart posed an annoying problem.

"I've done what I could using magic, but it's only a matter of time. Once the body fades into darkness, restoring the heart will be impossible."

"You're lying!"

"Why would I lie?"

It was an abstruse fact known by few. And understood by less. Something she deliberately refrained from sharing. And for good

reason. As a fairy, she could not lie. It was existentially and physically impossible for her to so much as *utter* even the most harmless of falsehoods. Of course, there were those who believed deception dripped from her forked tongue like darkness. And such languid minds would be correct. It might be impossible for her to speak anything but the unadorned truth without suffering consequence, but she was very good at twisting words. Why did she need to lie when the truth, contorted and contrived through purposeful absence of specific facts, useful or otherwise, could accomplished as much, if not more so?

"This portal shall take you straight to the leviathan."

A sweep of her arm connected her heart with the visceral darkness separating the shattered world from the greater universe.

"Once you locate the marionette, simply call my name and I shall bring you back."

As the purplish-black miasma stabilized, carving a temporary shortcut between Hollow Bastion and the monstrous creature swimming through the distant ocean of endless stars, she paused ever-so-briefly, "Are you sure you wish to do this? As enticing as it might feel, darkness is not something to be trifled with. Only the strongest of hearts can resist its influence."

"I'll do anything to save Kairi."

Sheathing Soul Eater across his back, Riku stared into the swirling vortex, "Even if it means stepping into the darkness itself."

Concealed by the darkness, Maleficent's smile stretched from ear to ear.

Author's Note

First of all, something I've alluded to, but never quite stated, is that Maleficent cannot lie. As a fairy, good or evil, she is incapable of uttering falsehoods. That doesn't mean she cannot twist her words

or the truth to her advantage. She simply cannot state direct lies. For example, she could promise you her assistance. But unless you pretty much get that guarantee written in triplicate, she *will* screw you over.

As for the flashback? It's funny. The scene between Riku and Ansem: Seeker of Darkness (because we all know it's Ansem: Seeker of Darkness) started as a non-canon post some dozens of pages ago. Which means, I guess, now it's canon. And it makes sense if you think about. The main reason Riku opened the door in Kingdom Hearts was because he was desperate to escape the islands. A prison without walls. He wanted to leave and was prepared to do so no matter what happened to everyone else. Here things are radically different. He still wants to leave. That much is the same. But Ryuko visiting the islands, Auron stopping by every now and then (and taking Jecht with him to Luca whenever the guy wants a break from family life) and Riku promising to take him, Kairi and Sora to Lindblum when they're older pretty much tempered his wander lust.

But the door still needed to be opened.

Last edited: Oct 20, 2019

Chapter 15.5

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/9/99/Kill-3-36-matoi.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/640?cb=20150413043008>]

Ryuko felt it coming from a mile away.

Despite preparing herself for the inevitable battle, it wasn't enough. Not by a long shot. Her nose twitched when the sudden gasp of air violently tickled the back of her throat, leaving everything feeling itchy and uncomfortable. Time slowed to a faltering crawl. And then stopped. She tried holding it back. She tried controlling herself. But it was pointless. Her efforts were meaningless. There was no way to change her fate. One way or another, whether she tried defying fate or accepted her place, it was going to happen.

"ACHOO!!!"

Through no small means, hours or perhaps days of constant walking and fighting through the darkness, they'd taken refuge upon a crystalline field. Magnificent, if dulled and obviously cracked, purplish-blue crystals totted the landscape, massive pillars of petrified shadows stretching between several feet to multiple stories above the dusty ground. Every so often a spark of violet electricity crackled between outcroppings.

"ACHOO!!!"

An eerie silence pressed upon their hearts.

"ACHOO!!!"

Whispers arrived steadily, leaving Ryuko wondering whether it was her beating heart or something far more unnerving.

"ACHOO!!!"

But she found herself caring little, if any, about the creeping darkness.

"Ugh..."

Perched on a crystal taller than her house back in Lindblum, one leg tucked against her chest and the other dangling off the side, Ryuko's annoyance resonated with some primordial aspect of the heart so easily forgotten, "... this place really sucks ass."

"Allergies?"

Her eyes swiveled towards the ostentatious - one of Satsuki's *favorite* words - figure shrouded in gaudy fabrics, multicolored patterns, random motifs and beaded chains, "Huh?"

"Perhaps there's something in the air. Something your heart cannot bear?"

It took a little longer than normal because she wasn't quite certain she heard what she thought she heard. But the longer Gogo's questions - more specifically, how he *rhymed* without batting an eye - echoed inside her heart, the more irritated and annoyed she found herself feeling. And as that frustration manifested, not only causing her eyebrows to sporadically twitch, but drawing out a high-pitched, slightly off-kilter and nearly inaudible chuckle, Ryuko took a deep and staggered breath.

God *damn* it, his jokes sucked!

For someone trapped in the Realm of Darkness for centuries, nothing but Heartless and despair keeping him company, the dumbass had the second worst sense of humor she'd ever heard. Not the good 'knows the punchlines but can't remember the timin' sort of humor. Or the 'so bad it's good' kind. Shit, she *wished* his humor was like that. No, Gogo was one of those special few people

who had *no* sense of timing, humor or punchlines, who tells jokes they think are funny but really aren't. Like Satsuki. Explaining the urge to grind her knuckles into his face until it was nothing but bloody paste and broken cartilage bubbling inside her heart.

But she didn't do it.

Because, honest to god, she felt *sorry* for the guy.

Not because her sis couldn't tell jokes. Satsuki could tell jokes. They just... *sucked*. Really, really sucked. Sucked to the point even Mako found it awkward to laugh. And the worst part about it? Satsuki knew she wasn't funny. She knew her sense of humor and timing were off. Gamagori even caught her sneaking out to take lessons from those pompous assholes in the Theater District.

Which only made Satsuki's inability to improve in any way, shape or form downright depressing.

"Nah, it ain't that."

There was a strange feeling in her heart. Almost like someone she knew did something fricking stupid. And she didn't like it, "Hey, there's something I've been wondering."

"Yes?"

With one hand propped underneath her chin and the other rubbing a specific spot between her shoulder and neck, Ryuko's mouth stretched into an exhausted yawn, exposing several fanged incisors, "What's the deal with your magic?"

"My magic?"

Gogo's surprise lasted several awkward seconds, proving she'd hit the nail on the head, "Surely you jest. A master of the Keyblade unaware of the arcane arts I wield?"

"Why would I ask if I knew the answer?"

It sounded like a sigh. Or maybe a muffled grumble. She didn't know. And quite frankly, it didn't matter. But something between frustration and begrudging acceptance wafted from the camouflaged man's heart as the curved dagger he'd been sharpening for some time, emerald and auburn resembling an archaic alloy of orichalcum and adamantite Ryuko could've sworn she'd seen somewhere before, flickered with noticeable crimson light, "I'm merely a master of the simulacrum. Nothing truly important."

"Simulacrum?"

Despite wracking her brain, cycling through countless hours training under Yen Sid, Lulu and even Merlin for a few days, Ryuko didn't know what the hell that mean. But she *did* notice that fancy display of light so very similar to her own, "You mind using smaller words?"

Gogo's shoulders slouched as a long, weary sigh rippled through his body.

"It *means* I can mimic abilities."

As a point of emphasis, or to simply prove he wasn't pulling her leg, he gently swung the jagged dagger. It was weaker. Far weaker than anything she could pull off with one hand tied behind her back and the other laying somewhere on the ground in a pool of blood. But it was a goddamn genuine Stock Break. Right down to the point-blank explosion gently scarring the landscape, "My heart instinctively connects with those I encounter. Friend. Enemy. Even those passing in the night. Through such peripheral connections so easily broken, I sample memories, allowing me to wield their abilities as if they were my own techniques."

"Neat."

The slightest trace of sarcasm clung to her voice, "So, what's the catch?"

"The catch?"

"Yeah, the catch."

With her hand now resting against her cheek, Ryuko repeated her answer. Slowly. Ensuring the introverted mimic heard each and every syllable. She considered herself a fairly honest person. Copying techniques without having to practice? Mimicking abilities simply by greeting someone? That was amazing. Complete bullshit. But freaking amazing, "Something that overpowered and broken ain't free. There's gotta be a drawback."

"Hmph."

Now *that* sounded like muffled laughter.

"You would be correct."

Gogo's fingers flexed, submerging the dagger within multicolored fabric, "I have little control over which memories I sample. It's hit and miss, I'm afraid. Furthermore, my magic cannot sample more than one heart at a time. Ah, lastly, pertaining to the question percolating through your mind. My mimicry extends solely to abilities learned through experience and practice. I cannot comprehend anything more than that."

"Sounds really interesting."

On the outside, she sounded slightly bored by what should have been an amazing answer. But on the inside, where nobody could see, emotions swirled and spiraled in an increasingly tempestuous storm. Darkness and light violently battling for control over something they'd never have more than the most tenuous grasp upon. She knew - she goddamn knew - he was referring to her Life Fibers. He must've seen something after that Hunter of the Dark tore open her shoulder. A glancing final attack after Threadcutter sliced through three of its friends and left the oversized Heartless barely able to stand on its own four legs.

"But just so we're on the same page..."

Since he'd pulled a perfect Climhazzard out of his ass, she'd been worried. And for a damn good reason. But if he was telling the truth and not spewing bullshit? Well, that was a huge weight off her shoulders. The less Life Fibers in the universe, the better everything would be.

"... what you're *really* saying is..."

A huff passed through her scrunched lips, "... you're basically a blue mage, right?"

"Don't compare my mastery of the simulacrum with such second-rate charlatans!"

"Geez, you're bein' awfully defensive."

She afforded the word air quotes. Because that's what it deserved. Grinning broadly, an almost shit-eating expression, she reached towards the Scissor Blade stabbed into the crystal next to her thigh, "There ain't something yer keeping secret?"

"Oh?"

Instead of falling for her bait, Gogo tilted his head. Not enough to look her in the eye. But enough that she knew he was paying attention, "If you wish to discuss secrets, let us begin with your miraculous regenerative abilities."

"That's none of your business."

Amusement twisting into well-deserved annoyance, Ryuko's fingers curled around the Scissor Blade, "But on the topic of bodies, how about you take off that helmet and show -"

"Quiet!"

The self-proclaimed master of the simulacrum's muffled voice pierced the miasma permeating the crystal forest. His confusion and

anxiety, scarce and extraordinary even in the worst of times, drew their argument to a premature finish, "Can you sense it?"

"Yeah."

She didn't think twice. She didn't overthink. Instead of focusing on the *why* or *how*, which really didn't matter in the grand scheme of things, Ryuko stood up, yanked the Scissor Blade out of the crystal and stepped forward, rapid-fire metallic *clanks* miniaturizing the hardened Life Fiber weapon before her sneakers touched the ground, "Something's coming."

"How do you know?"

A Life Fiber glowing bright crimson in the darkness uncoiled from her thumb, breaking the skin without really breaking the skin. A flick of her wrist, nonchalant and with almost perfect synchronicity with her steadied breathing, yanked the shrunken blade towards her neck. But only after it joined the other half of the complete set necessary to deal lethal damage to batcrap insane psychopaths like Nui Harime and Ragyo Kiryuin, which left her sight less and less these days, did she answer Gogo's question, "Let's just call it a gut feeling."

"Are you certain?"

Gogo was worried. But for once she wasn't too keen about mocking him. Because *she* was worried. Her breath was visible against the darkness. It was colder. The chill stabbed deep into her heart. Another sign something was seriously wrong, "Right before sneezing, I felt the darkness start pulling back. Almost like a tidal wave. Which is really bad. Because if this is anything like a real tidal wave, it's not gonna be long before something comes crashing down on our heads."

"That's... quite the observation."

The mimic's helmeted visage, crowned by a horn and bouquet of feathers, tilted forward, "If that is indeed the situation we face, it

would be wise to leave this crystalline juncture as quickly as possible."

"Yeah, no need to tell me -"

Her heart *thumped*.

It happened slowly and in the blink of an eye. An unnerving numbness trickled down her spine, spreading from her heart to the tips of her fingers and toes. Gogo's presence vanished into the background. And as her awareness expanding, moving behind normal human senses to something only two other people have experienced to any significant degree, forgotten memories bubbled to the surface, mixing and blurring together until she couldn't tell where one ended and another began. They slammed into her heart with the subtlety of a haymaker to the face.

She remembered every detail of the night Satsuki wore Junketsu. Senketsu's nervousness. His goosebumps. Mako pointed it out. How she couldn't sleep. The feeling something awful was going down.

But as her thoughts turned inward, drawing heart and soul into the past of an isolated world long since lost to the darkness, the realm *shattered*.

There was no earthquake. No explosion or eruption of darkness.

One moment she was standing on solid ground, lost in memories of a past she'd never recover, and the next she was falling into the infinite abyss lurking beneath the darkness.

"SHIT!!!"

Half-assed curses shouted into the wind as gravity proved itself a cold and heartless bitch didn't solve anything. Not on their own. But as she shouted at the top of her lungs, collapsing alongside whatever remained of the landscape into the waiting darkness, they made her feel better.

"GOD DAMN IT!!!"

Lithe muscles tensed underneath the unbridled fury manifesting in the form of a crimson explosion of twinkling stars. Threadcutter materialized in her waiting fingers, spinning gently as metal wove itself into existence. And with that power - the strength to defy fate - she lurched backwards, Keyblade propped overhead. Light clung to its quilt-like teeth. Vermilion possibilities mixed with golden experiences. Her entire body curved, shirt pulling upwards and exposing an exceptionally taut and well-defined stomach. And before she fell no more than several meters, Ryuko lurched forward and stabbed Threadcutter into the largest chunk of floating rock kept aloft through some arcane mixture of magic and darkness she didn't have the time or patience understanding.

"COME ON ALREADY!!!"

Fifty meters.

One hundred meters.

Two hundred meters.

Three hundred meters.

As her Keyblade sliced apart solid rock and jagged crystals like a hot knife through butter, she stomped both feet against the rough cliffside for extra support, doing everything possible to arrest her momentum short of suddenly learning how to goddamn fly. Ruby light flowed between her clenched fingers. Her hair rustled and swayed without meaning, granting life to the frustration dancing in her eyes. The pressure she placed on her sneakers slightly melted their soles, filling her nostrils with the noxious odor of burning rubber.

"I SAID... COME... ON..."

But for what felt like an eternity, she continued falling.

Her knuckles bled white. Her muscles *burned*. She focused everything on *stopping*. And as if responding to her heart's desperation, meters from the bottom of the hovering chunk of debris, inches before she'd need to figure out a last-ditch strategy to save her sorry ass from whatever lurked underneath the Realm of Darkness, Threadcutter caught on something and abruptly *stopped* dead in its tracks.

"... ugh..."

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Spit out dust falling into her mouth.

Curse.

"... shit..."

She wasn't punctual. She didn't have a watch. She didn't have a gummi phone. She didn't know how long she dangled from Threadcutter, every breath filling her lungs with darkness and shadows whispering into her ears. In a screwed-up place like the Realm of Darkness, where time meant jack shit and people survived centuries without eating or sleeping, it could have been hours, minutes, seconds or the blink of an eye. Maybe a literal eternity, the thought of which filled her mind with dread. But she pushed those thoughts aside, focusing on the unnerving sensation maturing inside her heart, one that reminded her of countless memories she'd long forgotten.

Something *powerful* was coming.

[Something familiar.](#)

Something that seriously pissed her off.

"Alright..."

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

"... time to deal with some shit!"

The sheer *force* tore Threadcutter free. Blade over hilt, a harsh keen whistling against her ears, it spun wildly in the darkness. But Ryuko didn't care because there was nothing for her to worry about. The Keyblade was her heart. And her heart was her Keyblade. They were one and the same. Never alone. Never separated. And so, long before Threadcutter so much as touched the abyss, as she charged full-sprint up the nearly vertical cliff, arms pumping and lungs screaming for air, it dissolved into streams of soothing crimson-gold brilliance only to reappear in her waiting fingers.

Where it belonged.

Two hundred meters.

Screaming at the top of her lungs, Ryuko sprinted towards the heavens with unyielding conviction and passion, slicing and dicing any approaching debris into dozens of pieces.

One hundred meters.

She didn't slow down. She didn't falter to catch her breath or wonder what lurked in the shadows. Every step was faster than the last. Solid rock and crystalline outcroppings shattered in her wake. Every pump of her arms drove Threadcutter back and forth, crimson light trailing from its quilted teeth.

Fifty meters.

It was single-minded determination that kept her moving. An implacable stubbornness Senketsu always praised before commenting about being more careful in the future. A measure of self-confidence far beyond human limitations. The sort of

enlightened willpower which allowed her body, Life Fibers or not, to pull off countless crazy and impossible feats.

Five meters.

As she breached the surface, landing on relatively solid ground only to momentarily lose her footing, sarcastic annoyance dripped from her heart.

"Great..."

It was almost here. She could sense it. Hell, she could goddamn see it. The skies had changed. The shifting reddish-purplish patterns tinted with black were gone, replaced by shadowy thunderclouds bearing something other than rain. The minimal light penetrating the shadows vanished, making it that much harder to breath without feeling like she was sucking up heaping scoops of nauseating bullshit smelling worse than wet dog and expired food.

"Come on!"

Even in the darkness pushing against her heart with everything it had, Ryuko saw everything with near perfect clarity, "What the hell are you waiting for?"

"RYUKO!!!"

The unexpected voice disrupted her concentration. A confused 'huh' passed through her parted lips as she blinked, then frowned before finally tearing her eyes away from the rapidly approaching annoyance. Because there he was. Gogo. The self-proclaimed mimic. Master of the simulacrum. Leaping across smaller chunks of floating rock and debris before landing next to her. And when he finally arrived, clothes fluttering in the wind, a single question managed to tear through her confusion, "You're still here?"

"What are you doing!?"

Furiously buffeted by the chaotic maelstrom tearing through the remnants of the once pristine crystalline grove, tassels and beads clanging against one another, Gogo's muffled voice confessed desperation and panicked worry, "We must flee! Now!"

"Run?"

She considered the guy's concern - including what it really meant - before clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth, "There ain't no point runnin'."

The island, unstable rock and crystal held together by some esoteric force she had no desire understanding, momentarily trembled, as if grasped by some unseen entity. Some of the smaller remnants, no larger than her kitchen, collapsed underneath the weight of something incomprehensibly ancient. They shattered into millions of pieces, breaking apart before falling into the darkness below. But holding Threadcutter aloft, breathed steadied and pulse registering slightly higher than 'Satsuki's gonna be pissed when she finds out I accidentally tossed out her front row ticket to tomorrow's play,' Ryuko watched as something incredibly massive emerged from within the agitated darkness, shadows tearing themselves asunder in its wake.

"Because it's already here."

This was her first time actually *seeing* the Cloud of Darkness outside of Merlin and Yen Sid's memories.

It was goddamn huge.

From her experiences within their memories, including everything that happened in the ocean between worlds, she had expected a massive bitch. But seeing the primordial Heartless with her own eyes made a fucking world of difference. It was almost unbelievable. The Cloud of Darkness made every other Heartless she'd slaughtered over the years look like damn ants! Ryuko didn't understand why, and it wasn't until much later she'd wonder why the comparison

come to mind, but the ancient monster was approximately the same size as the Original Life Fiber. Maybe a little bigger or smaller.

But even after chowing down on Nui Harime's severed head, that glowing ball of unwanted string hadn't unnerved every bone in her body.

Not like the emerald bitch bearing down on them.

"Tch!"

Vermilion light furiously spun between Threadcutter's quilted teeth, heralding the resolve blazing within her heart, "You've got some nerve showing yer ugly face!"

The Heartless didn't - couldn't - hear her. Not over the deafening wind roaring in her ears. Or the darkness blasting across the landscape, whipping her feathery hair into a chaotically dancing frenzy. The once quiet, almost eerily so, dimension had disappeared. In its place, brushing against her heart with the subtlety of Nui Harime's disturbing psychosis, were storms of turbulent shadows. And it was all because of the emerald bitch seeking what every Heartless, big or small or ugly, wanted more than anything. But if the Cloud of Darkness thought stealing her heart was going to be a walk in the fucking park, it was going to be in front hell of a goddamn painful surprise!

"Why are you still here!?"

Her fingers slipped against Threadcutter before settling in a stronger grip further down the handle, "This has nothing to do with you!"

She slid one foot backwards, sneakers scraping against the cracked landscape, kicking up clouds of purplish-black dust. The front of her feathery hair, glowing bangs of entwined black and crimson, lay matted against her forehead, slicken with sweat. What was Gogo waiting for? An invitation? Why was he standing around instead of running away? This had nothing to do with him! He didn't have a

Keyblade! He was just some poor bastard trapped in the darkness! Fighting an ancient Heartless should've been the last thing on his goddamn mind!

"This bitch is after me! Which means only one thing!"

All but announcing to the mimic either too stupid, scared or brave to take the hint, Ryuko's voice pierced the assailing maelstrom, "That door I've been lookin' for must be close!"

"Absurd!"

Gogo flinched when the beast *yelled*. An excruciating screech. A primordial *roar* that shook the fabric of reality, "Fighting such a foul creature would be suicidal!"

"Like I said! Run away! You ain't got no business fighting Heartless!"

In the midst of telling the exceptionally gaudy dumbass to run like a coward, the ruby undertone perpetually announcing to the entire universe how she wasn't normal, a small piece of herself she'd come to accept, bled into an almost bloody vermilion absent since that frustrating afternoon she'd beaten the ever-living shit out of Nui Harime when the sociopathic bitch decided death itself was optional.

"But I'm a Keyblade Master!"

Ryuko snapped her arm forward, elbow locked and Threadcutter aimed squarely between the Cloud of Darkness's glowing eyes.

"This Keyblade is more than a weapon! It's more than a symbol! It's not light! It's not darkness! It's my heart!"

She started screaming, both to get the point across and because the wind was loud enough to drown out her own thoughts. But as if forged of indomitable willpower second only to her sister's determination, beams of crimson light fiercer than the sun's burning surface exploded from her heart's innermost depths, "Too many

worlds have fallen to darkness! Too many families have been ripped apart! ALL BECAUSE I WASN'T ABLE TO SAVE THEM! THAT'S WHY I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU SAY! BECAUSE IF I DON'T STOP THIS THING, WHO WILL!?"

"Such... riveting confidence."

Spots danced before his eyes. The physical *weight* of Ryuko's light settled upon his shoulders. He found it nearly impossible to look directly at the Keyblade Master. But with noticeable dejection, he drew a familiar dagger from the kaleidoscopic fabrics and patterns concealing nearly every inch of his body, "But that same confidence confesses your ignorance. I may be no master, but I'm quite certain such a powerful creature cannot be slain. Not even by the Keyblade."

"Says you!"

Ryuko grinned. A vicious, confident smile, "Nothing's unkillable! If everyone says this thing's unkillable that just means I've gotta try harder than anyone's tried before!"

"You're insane, you know that?"

A snicker forced itself between her lips, "That's what you get when you stick with me!"

Light *exploded* from her heart. The pure radiance overwhelmed the darkness, flushing her skin with shades of gold, orange and crimson, "[IT'S WTF ALL THE WAY!!!](#)"

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Unknown Report 15

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"Huh?"

He'd been running alongside Aqua, wary of anything moving in the shadows, including a few variations of Heartless he'd never seen before, when something caught his attention. At first, after stopping in the middle of the treacherous landscape, water splashing underneath his shoes as it trickled off the edge of the path into oblivion, Mickey didn't know what he was feeling. The most he could figure, between looking around and focusing his senses, was that something far away - or perhaps, given the strange geometry of the darkness, close by - suddenly and inexplicably changed.

"Hold on, Aqua."

Star Seeker materialized in a soft explosion of gold and white possibilities. No matter the distance and darkness separating them, ebbing and flowing like a river, Ryuko's light remained a constant fixture on the horizon. It was always there, sometimes dimmer and other times brighter. The shadows couldn't stop her. So when something passed in front of her brilliant heart, vanishing as quickly as it appeared but leaving his heart feeling as if he'd been dunked in a bathtub of ice-cold water, Mickey's worry doubled.

And then tripled.

"Did you feel that?"

Darkened puddles of stilled water congealed over countless eons of tranquil emptiness rippled beneath Aqua's boots, "Feel what?"

As the forlorn master turned around, ankle-deep in one such puddle, thick miasma lapping at her armored boots, she stared into the surrounding darkness, dulled eyes snapping back and forth. Had

Mickey sensed something? Was something out there in the darkness? She'd been so busy paying attention to the path ahead, carefully marking each and every shadow for possible ambush, that she must've lowered her guard. A foolish and arrogant decision. The darkness was treacherous, cunning and overtly cruel. It feasted upon one's insecurities and doubts until nothing remained but an empty, heartless husk of a body.

But with staggered breath and Keyblade - Master Eraqus's, not Rainfell - swinging into position, light caressing its teeth, she followed Mickey's gaze into the darkness.

Yet there was nothing out there.

"I don't feel -"

Aqua didn't realize she'd stopped talking until Mickey grabbed her arm.

"Aqua!"

"Huh?"

Standing at her side, visibly worried by the pallor of her skin, Mickey's voice snapped her back to reality, "You froze up all of a sudden. Are you alright?"

"I just - "

Pausing briefly, if only to steady her wavering voice, Aqua ignored her shaking knees at the impossibility of what lurked beyond the darkness. Through slightly parted lips, moistened by how quickly she was breathing, Aqua's mind blanched to an ominous shade of alabaster, "Sorry, I was just... what I felt - what we felt. Was that... was that a Heartless?"

"Not just *any* Heartless."

With his mouth scrunched into a frown, the wayfaring king focused at Ryuko's light, "If I'm right, and gosh, I really hope I'm as wrong as can be, Ryuko's heart must've woken something terrible. A living calamity. A natural disaster capable of singlehandedly tilting the delicate balance between light and darkness - the Cloud of Darkness."

Aqua's breath caught in the back of her throat.

Goosebumps raced down her arms as bitterness threatened to consume what little happiness and hope she'd regained. Melancholy pulled at her heartstrings. Blue eyes dulled, light fading alongside the faint whisper passing through her lips. Back when she traveled the light, naïve to the growing threats waiting in the shadows, she hadn't witnessed the Heartless herself. But its presence had manifested in ways impossible to forget. Her home forever scarred by darkness. Master Eraqus. Terra. So many lives destroyed by someone their master once considered his brother.

"The Cloud of Darkness..."

She whispered the name under her breath, lips barely parted despite the heavy beating of her numbed heart, "The monster Xehanort unleashed upon the worlds."

"Huh?"

Mickey gawked, either from confusion or surprise she couldn't say. Possibly both, "You know about the Cloud of Darkness?"

"Terra said - "

Her heart quivered when memories, buried and forgotten underneath guilt and failure, stole her voice. Of course. Why should she have expected anything different? Time didn't exist in the realm of darkness. To her, everything felt like it happened only yesterday. Ten years. An entire decade passing in the blink of an eye. How many worlds succumbed to darkness because she'd been too weak to do

what needed to be done? How many people would be alive if she'd allowed Terra to sink into the darkness? Unable to fathom the answer to such a terrible question, Aqua touched her hand against her chest, fingers gently curled into a loose fist.

But then something crinkled.

A picture tucked away inside her halter top, next to the Wayfinder which had guided Mickey through the darkness.

"Terra blamed himself for what happened to our world."

It felt as if she'd stepped out of the darkness into the light. The despondence and melancholy clawing at her heart shattered into far too many pieces to count, "And Master Eraqus."

"Oh..."

Mickey's heart sunk into the pit of his stomach. He didn't know what to say. Or even if he should say anything. All this time, Aqua had known about the Cloud of Darkness. He'd hoped to spare her the truth. At least, not until they escaped back into the light alongside Ryuko and Gilgamesh. Momentarily unsure of himself, the trembling of his fingers steadied before stopping. With a resolute grimace, he steeled himself, swallowing the lump in the back of his throat, "I suppose... I mean, I guess the only thing I can say is... I'm awfully sorry, Aqua."

"You're... sorry?"

The apology sliced through the darkness faster than anything had the right to. Scarcely able to believe what she heard, Aqua's eyes widened, "Mickey, you don't need to - "

"No, I don't need to. But I want to."

Mickey shook his head, refusing Aqua's refusal of his honest apology, "Before I met you... before I found Ryuko wandering

Lindblum, lost on a world she couldn't possibly understand... I wasn't exactly Keyblade wielder material. I didn't take anything seriously. I goofed off... a lot. Maybe it was because I thought I was strong enough to, ya know, deal with anything that might come. As long as I believed in myself, nothing could stop me from protecting my friends. Then Ardyn proved me wrong."

He took a deep breath.

"Gilgamesh saved my life. If he hadn't decided to come back that day... if he prioritized saving himself over risking his life to save mine... I never would have met you or Ven or Terra."

As much as Mickey tried, he couldn't find the necessary courage to look Aqua in the eye, "That was when I realized something important. Something I'd forgotten. The Keyblade isn't a weapon to fight the Heartless. It isn't a tool to protect your friends. It's your heart. It's the key to understanding other people and making new friends. Gosh, I guess what I'm trying to say is, in some way, if not for Ardyn, I wouldn't be the person I am today."

"Mickey..."

"But like Ryuko always says - there's no point crying about the past."

The barest traces of a smile pulled on Mickey's mouth as he turned around and nodded, not at Aqua or himself, but the wisdom of such simple words, "Sure, you can worry about the past. And maybe, just maybe, you can learn from your mistakes. But obsessing on what you could have done - or could have changed - won't make you any happier. It'll only burden your heart. Even if you cry, you have to walk forward. One step at a time. Because while you might not be able to change the past, there's an entire future waiting to be written!"

"I guess you're right."

She'd spent so much time wandering the endless darkness, burdened by the weight of her failures, that she'd forgotten what was

important. Her friends. Terra. Ven. Ryuko. She was in the realm of darkness because of them. Because she cared about them more than she cared about herself. If she could go back in time, back to that stormy evening, Terra struggling against Xehanort's control, Aqua knew, beyond any shadow of a doubt, she'd make the same choice. No matter how much she wished otherwise, no matter how many times remnants of the past reared their heads, nothing could change the past.

Only the future mattered.

"Mickey, you go on ahead and find that door."

Aqua smiled, hope once more blossoming inside her heart, as she turned aside, prepared to make another choice, "Ryuko might be strong, but she's not invincible. No one is. Maybe it's just me, but she'll need help if she wants any chance of defeating the Cloud of Darkness."

"I'm sure Ryuko will appreciate your offer, Aqua, but I don't think that's necessary."

He believed in Ryuko. And, gosh, he wanted to believe some good existed within Gilgamesh. Deep down. But it was hard. Really hard. Because the guy was a kleptomaniac who stole swords. There was no way around that. His crime spree extended from Lindblum to worlds he'd never encountered. It took bribing Gilgamesh with one of the weapons Captain Steiner confiscated to enter the realm of darkness. Not even Regent Cid and Queen Garnet pardoning him for his crimes stopped him from continuing to steal swords. And yet, for some odd reason, Gilgamesh considered himself friends with Ryuko.

Or was it rivals?

"Ryuko might be a little headstrong, so I, uh, wouldn't bet against her attacking the Cloud of Darkness. Which might be a problem, now that I really think about it."

Bashfully scratching the back of his neck, Mickey did his best not to imagine Ryuko launching herself at the powerful Heartless, "But she's smarter than people give her credit for. Not to mention she's travelling alongside Gilgamesh. If something does happen, she can always escape back to -"

"AAAAEEEEIIIIIEEE!!!!"

An escalating baritone screech - not quite a scream yet less than terrified wailing - interrupted Micky's attempt at bolstering Aqua's resolve.

Obviously to the wayward king's confusion and bewilderment, the self-proclaimed greatest swordsman in the worlds, both light and darkness, semi-accomplished Triple Triad Player and humble collection of legendary weapons jettisoned out of a chaotic, unstable and erratic corridor of shadows. Not with anything resembling dignity or grace, for that would imply he possessed any measure of control. Rather, caught within gravity's inescapable assertion that one could not fly without wings or magic, or at the very least a head start, he tumbled towards the quickly approaching ground, three pairs of arms, five of which clasped swords, flailing wildly in the darkness.

"Huh?"

As the six-armed swordsman slammed face-first into the ground, bounced awkwardly back into the air, dropped several potions and disappeared into the darkness underneath, Aqua slowly blinked, "Was that..."

"HUMPH!!!"

An empty hand - his middle right hand, if he wanted to be specific - reached upwards. Calloused fingers guarded by protected armor of the highest caliber grasped an unstable perch and launched him skyward. A burst of exquisite momentum. Enough force to swing his muscular and well-toned physique, forged over countless perilous adventures throughout the known and unknown worlds, into a front

flip worthy of praise from those who pride themselves upon simplistic gymnastic displays.

"Curse this foul realm of nightmares and dreamscapes!"

Spinning blades heralded his return onto the bedrock of safety. And the furious tornado composing of five, not six, legendary weapons, including Kikuichimonji, continued for another few seconds before his ascent and descent until, with a purposely dramatic *stomp*, Gilgamesh landed exactly where his face left a handsome imprint of itself in the ground. Followed by an awkward stumble when his right foot, which should have been planted forward, twisted five degrees clockwise.

"What was I thinking? Proceeding blindly into a fog is the epitome of nonsense!"

"Gilgamesh!?"

"Gah... huh, who's there?"

The voice sounded like the mouse. In fact, it was an eerily perfect mimicry of the mouse's voice. So when he turned around and noticed Mickey standing next to a young blue haired woman, who looked awfully familiar for someone he'd never seen before, Gilgamesh scratched his chin, "Oh? Mickey, is that you? I could've sworn you... err, what I meant was, thank goodness you've managed to survive for so very long now! I was beginning to think you'd already succumbed to that massive darkness and would never be able to hand over Caliburn as previously discussed!"

"What are you doing here?"

Mickey's uneasiness was palpable as he looked back and forth, desperately hoping Ryuko would leap out of the darkness any second, "Where's Ryuko? I thought you were with her!"

"Don't blame me! Blame the Heartless!"

Try as he might, Gilgamesh couldn't fathom the mouse's concern with Ryuko. Sure, there was reason to believe she might eventually require assistance. Particularly against an endless stream of ravenous shadows intent on devouring her heart like it was yesterday's leftover Quiche Lorraine. But she was a grown woman. A Keyblade Master. His rival. The only person allowed to best him in one-on-one combat.

"Humph! That tidal wave of darkness nearly caused me to misplace Kikuichimonji!"

Almost by instinct, said naginata spun between his splayed fingers before connecting pommel-first with the ground. Talking about Ryuko was good, but as anyone who'd spoken with the woman could attest, she was headstrong. And stubborn. Really stubborn. Almost to the point he wondered if her heart was chiseled from granite. Going on ten years without so much as a rematch or friendly spar? The nerve! Maybe Ryuko needed someone to organize her schedule. Like a personal secretary. Not that he'd suggest such a thing himself.

Phantom pains still wracked his jaw from the last he foolishly offered Ryuko his honest opinion.

"Is she alright? What happened!?"

Gilgamesh opened his mouth only to realize it wasn't the mouse, but the strangely familiar blue haired woman, who demanded information. A Keyblade Master judging by the weapon in her right hand. But one side eying Lightbringer like it was a piece of fresh meat. Geez, why was she looking at the legendary broadsword with such intensity? Did he owe her some munny or gil or something? It was embarrassing. And despite the significant difference between their individual statures, he was at least three feet taller than the woman, Gilgamesh maneuvered the magnificent blade of legend out of view.

"Bah! I don't know why you're so worried!"

Keeping careful track of the woman's proximity to Lightbringer, he threw some of his hands into the air and scoffed, "I'm sure she's fine! Last I saw her, she was showing those creatures what it means to challenge a true master of the Keyblade!"

His confidence in Ryuko was genuine. It should have placated the mouse. They were both thinking about the same Ryuko, weren't they? Explosions. Magic. Light. Awe-inspiring feats of superhuman strength, agility and endurance. Impossible stubbornness in the face of incomprehensible odds yet emerging victorious nine out of ten times?

"... what?"

It required another few seconds for Gilgamesh to realize something was terribly amiss.

"What?"

He'd been lost in thought, thinking not only about the upcoming Festival of Champions but the Triple Triad tournament, and whether or not he would be able to make it back in time for the latter, when the mouse's continued silence filled his heart with confusion.

"Did I miss something?"

Last edited: Nov 3, 2019

Chapter 15.6

A quick heads-up. This is only the first part of Ryuko's fight against the Cloud of Darkness. It might be me, but it would be a grave injustice to rush through the fight. How many parts will there be? Who knows. Enjoy!

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/f/fd/Sc00012.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/800?cb=20140315010541>]

"THAT DOES IT!!!"

Everything about the realm of darkness was bullshit.

She'd long accepted that.

But that was *nothing* compared to how much she despised the Cloud of Darkness.

It was a Heartless stronger than anything she'd faced since Ardyn. A monster capable of going toe-to-toe against Merlin, Lulu, Beatrix and Yen Sid without breaking a sweat. A breathing calamity whose mere presence destroyed the balance between light and darkness. And the only thing it decided to do - the only thing it had been doing since she left Gogo swallowing her dust- was summon swarms of lesser Heartless?

"NOW I'M FRICKIN' PISSED!!!"

As her sneakers kicked through the air, dragging the rest of her body along for the ride, Ryuko danced upon currents of magic. Feathery hair, stained permanently crimson by countless Life Fibers and maturity, rustled in the maelstrom accompanying the enormous Heartless's arrival. Pitch-black clouds swirled overhead, pouring something that felt like rain, but she'd bet ten thousand gil wasn't

water. It was cold. She was cold. Over the last few minutes, the temperature dropped at least ten degrees.

Yet that didn't stop Threadcutter from lopping off another Darkside's head.

"COME ON!!!"

Planting one foot against the decapitated Heartless, she took a deep breath and launched herself further into the fray as lightning flashed through the tumultuous heavens.

"DID YOU THINK IT WOULD BE THIS EASY!?"

The repugnant darkness no longer burned her lungs as she crashed to the ground, stumbled several steps before breaking into a full-blow sprint. Her sneakers squeaked, soaked with something awfully similar to water but far too bitterly cold to be rain. Surrounded by countless Heartless, more than one hundred but far less than a thousand, Threadcutter dissolved into crimson and gold light as she swung the Keyblade. Again. And again. And again. As she dashed deeper into the darkness, her arm was nothing more than an endless blur of deadly motion.

One after another, dozens at a time, Heartless after Heartless disintegrated in the wake of her righteous fury.

In a matter of seconds, a massive chunk of the once formidable horde had been reduced to dissolving shadows and dust.

"Tch!"

And then one particularly ballsy Heartless, skinnier than the imp-like bastards always popping out of the shadows but several times larger, emerged from her shadow, clawed fingers reaching towards something it had no right to touch.

"Nice try!"

She didn't even bother using Threadcutter.

"But I don't have time..."

It happened in the blink of an eye. Literally. And she saw every goddamn second with excruciating detail. As the perverted Heartless launched itself out of her shadows, claws reaching towards her unguarded chest, Threadcutter vanished into the depths of her heart. Screaming incoherently at the top of her lungs, fingers now free to clench into a fist, Ryuko reared her arm backwards. Faster than Satsuki could find loopholes in arguments, her expression shifted from annoyed to downright pissed to fucking hell. And with enough power to make Mako proud, she *punched* the surprised Heartless.

No.

Punched didn't quite get the point across.

She *pulverized* the denizen of darkness's entire existence into the next dimension.

"... for your..."

Viscous darkness splattered her knuckles.

Shadows crawled down her fingers.

There was a sound almost like a wet bag of grass falling apart.

Then a soft crunch as the Heartless dissolved into a fine mist of visceral darkness.

"... NONSENSE!!!"

She might not have learned much at Honnouji Academy. Hell, her memories of Rinne High School were fuzzy, mostly because going to an ordinary school after fighting tooth and nail saving the world from Life Fibers, was boring. Who cared about math after flying through fricking space? But one thing she and Senketsu learned between

sleeping, eating and beating the living shit out of Satsuki's faceless student body, sometimes two or three times in the same goddamn week, was *never* hold anything back.

Not in a real fight.

In a bare-knuckled brawl, where the first one to falter died, rules and honor meant absolute shit! The bastard doing his damn best to stab you in the heart - or steal your heart - ain't gonna give two shits about waiting their damn turn! They won't hold back because you have some archaic sense of fair play. They're either arrogant jackasses walking funny because of the enormous sticks shoved up their asses or stuck-up haughty bitches with egos larger than Kingdom Hearts and a sadistic streak a mile wide. They don't care about honor. They're not going to play by the rules.

If you want to win... if you want to protect everyone you care about... you've gotta be prepared to go the full distance.

Don't hold anything back.

Fight as hard as you can.

Fight until you're lying face-down in the dirt, bloodied and beaten.

And then get the hell back up and fight some more.

"Enough of this bullshit!"

It never ended. It never goddamn ended. More Heartless were standing in her way. Different Heartless. *New* Heartless. Almost as if the realm of darkness was starting to realize she'd settle for nothing less. Instead of the standard monsters, wolf-like creatures numbering in the dozens barreled through the shadows. Thick tendrils attached to their misshaped heads cracked back and forth with no rhythm or reason. Acid dripped on the ground from fanged maws, dissolving rock and crystal. Glowing yellow eyes didn't blink,

not once, while razor-sharp claws tore both darkness and shadow asunder in their wake.

These were true Heartless.

"RAAAAAAGHHHH!!!"

Yet Threadcutter still sliced through the bastards easier than a hot knife through butter.

CRASH!!!

The initial impact sent several Heartless flying into the air, lithe and muscular bodies violently twisting at broken and nauseating angles disturbing to the heart. Those same snapping jaws shattered. Limbs broken. And yet, without slowing down in the slightest, Ryuko's feet carried her forward. The *snap-stomp* of her sneakers against pebbles and gravel kicked up dust. A slight jolt caught her attention when one of the wolf-like beasts managed to clench its acid-coated teeth around Threadcutter mid-swing. One drop touched her finger, smoke rising from the bubbling wound in the split-second before her Life Fibers effortlessly repaired the damage. And in the next second, her Keyblade carved through the Heartless, sending both halves of the dissolving creature splattering to the ground.

But she wasn't done.

[Not quite yet.](#)

A kick of her left foot launched her skyward.

Threadcutter spun around her fingers, light building between its teeth, before, with more force than necessary, she flipped forward and *slammed* it against the ground.

KA-BOOM!!!

Pearlescent light cascaded across the desolate landscape. Pillars of light, crimson-orange swirling within their depths, rippled outwards,

disintegrating whatever Heartless miraculously survived the initial explosion. Hundreds of the creatures vanished in the blink of an eye. Maybe even thousands. Faster than she could curse - which was pretty damn fast - the entire floated island was cleared of Heartless. Except for the Cloud of Darkness, which seemed a little *too* interested in what she'd done for a creature bereft of higher reasoning and human emotions, every other creature had been reduced to dust on the darkness and fading memories.

"Alright..."

Her voice was soft, threateningly so.

"... no more games!"

The Cloud of Darkness loomed over the realm like a goddamn hawk. Its presence, the culmination of eons of darkness clashing against light, worsened the raging storm. Wind howled and lightning crackled. Water dripped down her face. Feathery hair lay matted against her forehead and neck. A faint tinkling, almost like distant laughter, whispered into the deepest recesses of her beating heart as she yanked Threadcutter out of the earth, dirt falling from its quilted teeth. The darkness was getting thicker by the second. Her heart felt like it was swimming through molasses.

And yet she didn't care.

"I don't know what you're playing..."

Crimson, vermilion and gold clung to Threadcutter as she swung it forward with an audibly metallic *clank*, "... but I'm not gonna give you the chance to pull it off!"

Underneath her indomitable determination and willpower, a vibrant blood-red sigil appeared around Threadcutter, concentric circles and glowing runes slowly rotating opposite one another. But that was merely the start. A precursor to what she *really* wanted. Starting at her heart, working its way through her arms and hands, magic

streamed down her Keyblade's quilted teeth. Condensed to a pinprick of blindingly light at the center of the rotating sigils, transforming rapidly from red to reddish orange to yellow before settling on a brilliant hue of exotic sapphire, flames hotter than the surface of the sun roared into existence.

"Tch... ugh... gah!"

It hurt.

It hurt like a fucking bitch.

It felt like she'd gone three rounds with a volcano.

Her hands were *literally* burning.

"S-Shit!"

Ryuko couldn't understand what caused her to do something this stupid. Sure, she had stupid ideas. A lot of stupid idea. Just because she was a Keyblade Master didn't mean she was smarter than everyone else. Satsuki was proof of that. And coming up with a powerful technique out of nowhere? Shit! When she found out, Beatrix was literally going to kill her. But something about the Cloud of Darkness doing nothing but summon other Heartless set her heart on edge. It freaked her the hell out. A. Heartless as powerful as it - hell, any goddamn Heartless - should have attacked. It should have done *something*.

But it hadn't.

And that's how she knew if she didn't make the first move... if she didn't pull what amounted to a miracle out of thin air... it would be too late.

"RAGHHHH!!!"

She screamed. She roared. She overwhelmed the pain through sheer, unadulterated fury.

"... TAKE... THIS!!!"

As the magical energy finally stabilized, Ryuko snarled. She sucked at magic. She was humble enough to admit it. Whenever she tried learning something new, it normally blew up in her face. But there was one school of magic she was *really* good at. A particular talent neither Beatrix or Satsuki or even Lulu had. It's why she could deal with a little pain. And it was why she grinned viciously through lips charred black underneath the autumnal light.

"FLARE!!!"

The kickback nearly broke her arms.

"... god... damn... it!"

She couldn't have prepared. It was impossible. Magic like this? There was NO way to prepare. Not without years of practice. With one eye forced shut by the immense pressure and every inch of exposed skin sizzling underneath the intense backdraft, Ryuko winced. Spittle spewed between her charred lips only to instantly vaporized. Her arms were doing their damn best to buckle. As she forced more and more magic into the technique, her sneakers quickly started melting, leaving trails of molten rubber on the ground. The unholy agony of her body literally melting went beyond standard pain.

It went beyond the concept of physical torture.

"... not yet!"

But instead of giving up, instead of taking the easy way out, she pushed through the pain. Steam hissed between cheeks burnt black by the excruciating heat. Blood trickled down her arms and fingers. It dripped from her nose. Oozed from the corners of her blackened and charred lips. But she held her ground. Tightening her grip around Threadcutter, she pushed more and more magic into the shaking Keyblade and watched through wincing eyes as the immeasurably

hot sapphire flames slammed into the Cloud of Darkness with the power of a miniature supernova.

"... not... yet..."

Everything *hurt*.

Ryuko couldn't understand how she was still conscious. Everything had a price. Magic this strong... magic this powerful... took a heavy toll. But looking a gift horse in the mouth wasn't her thing.

Yet even she had limits.

"... c-crap..."

Her body gave up long before her heart. At the last possible second, right when it seemed she'd be cooked from the inside out, Life Fibers included, she collapsed onto her hands and knees.

"Gah... hah... hah... hah..."

It hurt to breathe. She could barely think. Everything from her shoulders to fingers... every inch of exposed skin... was charred black. And hurt. It *goddamn* hurt. As the intense magical flames blasting out of Threadcutter sputtered and faded, leaving nothing but terrible memories and scorched rock as proof she pulled off something fricking amazing, Ryuko flopped onto her back and gasped, more than one curse spewing into the darkness. Over and over again, as if she'd nearly drowned and was gulping down mouthfuls of oxygen, she screamed vulgarity and certain obscenities she'd never allow Mako to repeat. Not to herself. Not to Gamagori.

And NEVER in pleasant company.

"Ugh..."

Threadcutter slipped out of her fingers, sliding across the rain-soaked dirt as vulgarity gave way to annoyed moaning.

"Shit... that was... a goddamn... terrible idea..."

She was a fucking moron. Shooting off a full-powered Flare out of the blue without so much as a minute of practice? Shoving more and more magic into her Keyblade until something happened? She was supposed to be a Keyblade Master, not some street punk singlehandedly invading Honnouji Academy without a goddamn strategy. If it weren't for the Life Fibers shoved into her body, she'd probably be dead. Or close to death's door.

"Satsuki... can never... know... about this..."

As the rain returned, droplets splashing against her scorched face and arms, a chuckle forced its way out of her charred throat. Why? She didn't know. Maybe it was because she took down the Cloud of Darkness. Or maybe it was avenging Beatrix. Or pulling off one of the hardest magical techniques. Or maybe it was all three. Like hell she knew the real answer.

"... ouch..."

But that didn't make moving any less painful.

"... shit..."

How the hell could rain *hurt*?

"Crap... never doing... that again..."

If she could move her arms, she'd probably flip off whatever remained of the Heartless.

"Well... ugh... time to... get up."

The Cloud of Darkness might have kicked the bucket, but as she staggered onto her feet, Threadcutter stabbed into the ground for support, the rain poured harder than ever. Bitter winds rustled her matted hair. Lightning illuminated the shadows. Cataclysmic *booms* of thunder shook the realm. But within mere moments of standing,

Keyblade propped against her shoulder, mouth scrunched into an annoyed glower, every life-threatening and normally lethal wound disappeared. Flesh knitted itself shut. Burns vanished. Excruciating agony faded into mild pain before vanishing entirely, leaving her little worse for wear outside singed clothes and her jacket being little more than tattered fabric hanging from her shoulders.

"Must've really pissed off the darkness."

That answer didn't make any sense. Not in her head and certainly not out loud. But it really didn't matter. The Heartless was dead. She was alive. The worlds were safe from future incursions. That was a win-win in her book. Nobody could take this victory away from her.

"Alright..."

Drawing out her irritation, she glanced back and forth, searching the desolate landscape for any trace of gaudy fabrics, "... back to business. Where the hell is -"

A bead of water trickled down her cheek.

"Of course."

When the viscous darkness cascaded across the landscape, extinguishing any remaining traces of fire, Threadcutter swung off her shoulder, ["It's never this goddamn easy."](#)

As the primordial manifestation of darkness brushed aside the searing ash and burning smoke from her bullshit powerful Flare with nothing more than a soundless screech that sent shivers down her spine, Ryuko rolled her tongue inside her mouth. Tasting the lingering traces of blood, she swept Threadcutter forward, teeth pointed straight at the Heartless. And then cursed. A lot. Why had she expected anything else? Life goddamn sucked. Of course, given the options between surviving and burning to nothing, the Cloud of Darkness not only survived, but didn't have a goddamn scratch on its fricking massive body.

"Huh?"

Yet that *wasn't* why her heart sank into the pit of her stomach.

Reddish-orange spheres surrounded the Cloud of Darkness, manifesting out of the shadows with no real rhythm or reason. Ten. Twenty. Fifty. One hundred. Two hundred. And then she stopped counting, not by choice, when a disconcerting thought whispered into her heart. It wasn't words or noises. It was a gut feeling. It was her heart screaming at the top of its lungs that some really shit was about to go down.

"Oh, you've gotta be shitting me!"

It was almost obnoxious.

At the exact moment she realized what the Heartless was planning, every one of the particle beams - previously suspended in the darkness around the Heartless's claws and tendril-like hair - simultaneously shot forth. An approaching salvo of death and destruction covering hundreds of feet in the blink of an eye.

"NOT A CHANCE!!!"

Only to be stopped by a translucent barrier, hexagonal plates woven from cerulean light, shimmering into existence. Summoned forth by her Keyblade. But that didn't mean shit. She still felt the explosions. Never-ending eruptions of darkness against the barrier. They looked deceptively small. But the pencil-thin lasers, none thicker than her fingers, smashed into her barrier One after another. Nonstop. Hundreds of them. She didn't know how long the Cloud of Darkness's attack lasted. It could have been seconds. Or minutes. But as time slowed to an agonizing crawl, hair dancing and fluttering in the echoing reverberations, her eyes widened at something completely unexpected.

CRACK!!!

"What..."

CRACK!!!

"... the hell!?"

Ryuko panicked, she'd admit that, when cracks, small yet growing at an alarming rate, crisscrossed the barrier.

"NO!!!"

Locking both shoulders and elbows, lips pulled into a snarl and feathery hair whipping back and forth in the screaming wind somehow penetrating her barrier yet letting nothing else through, she gagged as the never-ending assault clogged her nose with darkness. Everything smelled like wet dog and shit. She could barely breathe without sucking down a mouthful of nauseating shadows. She didn't know how. Or why. But she could feel the Cloud of Darkness. Which made no goddamn sense. Heartless didn't have emotions. They couldn't 'feel' anything, not happiness or sadness or wanting nothing more than to pound something into a bloody smear.

"NOT YET!!!"

The cerulean light spilling from her heart evolved into a blinding supernova.

Magic danced around Threadcutter like snowflakes caught in a blizzard as the cracks spreading across the barrier reversed direction and vanished.

Reinforced by the sudden rush of power, the barrier's azure hue, beautiful and mystical, obtained an errant vermilion, orange and yellow streaks staining its translucent surface.

CRACK!!!

But it wasn't enough.

CRACK!!!

As the particle beams continued slamming against her barrier, more than she'd originally noticed surrounding the Cloud of Darkness, another series of dangerously thin cracks slowly spiderwebbed before her eyes.

CRACK!!!

Yen Sid had warned against pulling a stunt like this. Every person far more experienced with magic - Satsuki, Lulu, Mickey and even goddamn Steiner - explained how dangerous and stupid it was. Barriers weren't designed for prolonged use, they said. Attempting to hold a barrier for any length of time would rapidly drain her magic and endurance. The longer she continued weaving magic into the barrier, the more exhausted she'd end up being.

CRACK!!!

"SHIT!!!"

CRACK!!!

"SHIT!!! SHIT!!!"

CRACK!!!

Blood dribbled down her lips as she bit the inside of her cheek. Mouth filled with the taste of fresh copper and arms feeling like lead weights, Ryuko ground her sneakers against the dirt. She wasn't stupid. Well, not *that* stupid. Pushing more power into something normally worked. But against an actual catastrophe older than time itself? Hell no! She'd have more luck convincing Satsuki to start her own line of fashion than outlasting the Cloud of Darkness in a battle of goddamn endurance.

CRACK!!!

At the last possible second, right when her barrier resembled a stained-glass portrait rather than something guarding her heart from darkness, she shifted her center of balance. She lurched sideways, Threadcutter sweeping in a wide arc. And by the time the barrier shattered underneath the assault, raining magic and light through the darkness, she was already gone.

Which led to another problem.

"SHIT! SHIT! SHIT!!!"

She'd forgotten from Merlin's memories that the Cloud of Darkness's lasers *chased* their target.

"FUCKING HELL!!!"

Sprinting faster than an airship didn't mean shit when what chasing you was nearly as fast. If not a little faster. She stumbled. She flipped hand over foot. She danced. But she never stopped. Never took a moment to catch her breath. Because there was no damn time. She could hear the beams tracking her heart. The powerful-as-crap lasers twisted and spiraled around one another. Sometimes merging. And sometimes splitting apart into two or three equally deadly projectiles. The dull *hum* of crackling darkness filled her ears as explosions violently rocked the desolate landscape, obscuring the Cloud of Darkness behind plumes of purplish-black smoke and scorched dust.

"DAMN IT!!!"

As the realm of darkness and the meager scrap of floating debris trembled underneath the never-ending assault, Ryuko noticed something out of corner of her eyes.

"AW, COME ON!!!"

The beams were actually catching up to her.

"HOW THE HELL IS THIS FAIR!?"

This was bad.

This was very, very bad!

"ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!!!"

Chunks of shattered rock rained downwards, bouncing off her shoulders and head, as panic devolved into annoyance. Not the normal type of annoyance. Not the 'damn, this is gonna suck.' But 'oh crap, this was REALLY gonna fucking suck.' Because what she needed to do - what she *had* to do - was going to sting.

And by sting, she really meant hurt like a fucking bitch.

KA-BOOM!!!

Six or seven lasers smashed into the hastily woven barrier, ricocheted at awkward angles into the darkness and exploded against empty terrain somewhere in the distance. The rest pierced right through her magic like it was nothing. But she'd expected that to happen. If magic could block everything, she wouldn't be stuck in this stupid mess. But drawing upon experience, backpedaling and flipping away from the remaining homing lasers, Ryuko breathed deeply. In and out. With her sneakers sliding backwards along soggy dirt, Threadcutter spun around outstretched fingers, which clenched tightly as she thrust the Keyblade forward, intercepting the nearest particle beam.

BOOM!!!

Light and darkness clashed against one another for dominance.

Her arm nearly broke from the stupidity.

But she could take it.

"GAH!!!"

What she couldn't withstand was *thirteen* particle beams, each more than enough to take down a normal Keyblade Master, simultaneously smashing into Threadcutter.

"Hah... Hah... Hah..."

Blood dripped down her chin as she opened her eyes, blinking away the familiar pain wracking her body. It trickled from her lips, filling her mouth with the taste of fresh copper and failure. Threadcutter was gone. Where? She didn't know. It wasn't really important in the grand scheme of things.

"Never doing that again..."

That was the understatement of the goddamn century. Aware of where she was and how she managed to crash hundreds of feet from where she'd been standing only a few seconds ago, she shook her head, dislodging nearly an entire puddle of water onto the shattered crystal, rolled her tongue inside her mouth, spat out a glob of blood and latched her fingers onto razor-sharp and jagged crystals.

"Really should have... ugh... expected that..."

This wasn't the first time she'd seen the Cloud of Darkness's attacks. Well, it was. And it wasn't. Thanks to Merlin and Yen Sid, she'd watched the goddamn Heartless bulldoze its way through everything Beatrix threw at her. But memories weren't enough. Memories didn't say everything about anything. You could watch and listen. But you couldn't *feel* the darkness smashing against your Keyblade. You couldn't experience second-hand burns as Threadcutter sizzled. And you couldn't grimace as your back smashed into a crystal harder than damn diamonds.

"Gonna feel... this in... the morning..."

One final *yank* excised her entire body from the crystal.

"Alright, so Plan A didn't work."

Swiping a finger against the corner of her lips, Ryuko rubbed her thumb and index fingers together, blood causing the two digits to grow slick, before spitting the rest of the liquid out of her mouth, "Time to improvise!"

It was faint. Maybe nothing more than a figment of her overactive imagination. But something lingered on the breeze. A disturbing feeling of wrongness. Like she was forgetting an important piece of information. The raging storm howled around the Cloud of Darkness and herself. Rain splashed against her face. And clenching her fingers into a fist, she propped Threadcutter onto her shoulder and huffed. Oh. Right. She hadn't seen Gogo in a while. Was he dead? Or just hiding? She couldn't guess. But that was fine. If he decided not to stick around, so what? That was his choice. Fighting a goddamn force of nature wasn't for everyone.

That didn't mean she wasn't pissed he ran away after promising to fight.

Or that she wasn't going to punch him in the face.

"Fine. Have it your way."

At least she no longer needed to worry about protecting his ass.

"But this time, *you* make the first move."

Without taking her eyes off the Cloud of Darkness looming overhead like a helicopter parent on back to school night, she tossed Threadcutter between her fingers. Flipping it handle over teeth, over and over again, she carefully measured the distance. She watched the Heartless pivot, turning its complete attention onto her. She noticed countless particle beams streaming towards her new location.

And half a second later, she reared her arm backwards, sucked in mouthfuls of darkness and *hurled* her Keyblade, one of the most dangerous weapons in the universe, a blade that could lead to salvation or ruin, at the incarnation of darkness.

"Heh..."

As the Keyblade left her fingers, crimson and gold blurring into some unholy mix of colors, Ryuko grinned underneath the approaching salvo, vermilion light flickering between bangs of feathery hair.

"... guess ya don't have any brains in that oversized skull of yours, do ya!?"

She breathed in.

And then out.

And then she was gone.

"NOW LET'S TRY THIS AGAIN!!!"

Magic kept her aloft in the darkness. Her sneakers skidded upon currents of ruby light. The wind rushed through her hair. She felt the darkness grasp at her heart only to smack into the impenetrable barrier that was Ryuko goddamn Matoi. She was so close - so fricking close - to the Cloud of Darkness that its presence swallowed hope, leaving nothing but fear and endless despair. The cacophony of detonating particle beams buffeted her body with debris and smoke. Oranges and reds and yellows danced across the emerald face looming every closer by the second.

"AND THIS TIME..."

As if gathering steam, pearlescent light streamed down the length of her Keyblade. It coated every inch of her blade, bathing its quilted teeth within endless splendor and impossible magnificence.

"... YOU'RE NOT WALKING AWAY!!!"

And at the last possible moment, clawed fingers reaching through the darkness towards her, she pivoted midair, planted her sneaker against the Cloud of Darkness's face and smashed Threadcutter into the heart-shaped hole on its forehead.

"SHOCK!!!"

Chapter 15.7

And here is part two. There was actually more after this, but after careful reading, it works better in the next part. But as for the content? Well, Ryuko's fought some fairly powerful people. Maleficent. Ardyn. Xehanort. Nui. Ragyo. But the Cloud of Darkness is 'literally' a force of nature older than the Keyblade War. It's a primordial Heartless. Power, stubbornness and sheer determination won't be enough to take it down.

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/3/3c/Kill-3-25-matoi-ryuuko-bleeding.jpg/revision/latest?cb=20150413042159>]

"NOW LET'S TRY THIS AGAIN!!!"

Her sneakers skated upon vermillion light. Rain buffeted her face. Ice cold fingers, nails tipped by razor-sharp claws, grasped at her heart only to falter against the impenetrable barrier that was Ryuko goddamn Matoi. Hovering high in the air, she was close - so fricking close - to the Cloud of Darkness that its presence swallowed hope, radiated despair and exhaled desperation.

"AND THIS TIME..."

Pearlescent light streamed through her heart into Threadcutter.

"... YOU'RE NOT WALKING AWAY!!!"

Screaming until her throat turned hoarse, Ryuko flipped forward and planted both feet against the Cloud of Darkness's forehead. Aware of everything, she snarled, dual-toned feathery hair whipping frenziedly in the chaotic maelstrom. Her heart sang with power. Her soul and body synchronized with the purest of lights. And with a defiant shout penetrating straight to the heavens, she stabbed Threadcutter into the screwed-up hole placed smack dab in the middle of the Heartless's forehead.

"SHOCK!!!"

Power - pure, unrefined and all-around badass - detonated point-blank in front of her face.

It didn't hurt.

Hell, she didn't feel anything.

No matter how many times she wove her heart's innermost light into an attack, it always surfaced memories of Satsuki *actually* smiling or Mako laughing.

"HAAAAAAHHHH!!!"

But the warm and fuzzy feelings could wait until she finished kicking the Heartless's fricking ass!

With her Keyblade jammed into the heart-shape hole above its unblinking eyes, Ryuko latched onto that faucet inside her soul and twisted it all the way to the left. In an instant, the warmth transformed into a searing, unrelenting inferno. Power exploded from Threadcutter. Having nowhere to go but forward, the sudden influx of brilliant crimson light cascaded into the Cloud of Darkness. Waves upon waves of liquid vermilion devoured shadows. Twinkling stars colored gold, ruby and salmon brushed against her face. The crimson undertone permeating her hair momentarily turned several other colors, resembling a kaleidoscope unlike anything else throughout the universe.

"IT'S OVER!!!"

Her knuckles blanched white as her Keyblade sunk the last few inches into the Cloud of Darkness's forehead.

"RAAAAGGGHHHH!!!"

As the rain curved around herself and the Heartless too dumb to do anything other than float around and get its fricking ass kicked all the

way to Alexandria and back, she immediately reversed her grip on Threadcutter, pivoted on the spot and launched herself down its face.

"NOW GO!!!"

Crimson and vermilion crested and swelled like waves crashing on the beach of some lonely island.

"TO!!!"

The sheer brilliance reached the furthest recesses of the darkness.

"HELL!!"

Spittle mixed with rain as she dragged her Keyblade down the Heartless's nose, over pouty lips that looked as if the Cloud of Darkness had a goddamn beauty regimen before reaching its chin. Rain-soaked hair lay matted against her forehead. Every muscle in her arms and shoulders burned. Her fingers trembled. She was *exhausted*. But silhouetted against countless explosions rippling in the wake of Threadcutter's slice and dicing, Ryuko nevertheless sucked in heaping mouthfuls of nauseating and disgusting darkness.

One breath.

And then another.

On the third sharp intake of disgusting air, her heart sank into the pit of her stomach.

"The hell...?"

Still gasping for breath, she whipped around, sapphire eyes reflecting the lingering explosions. Something was wrong. She could sense it. But almost right away, brows furrowing into a glower, Ryuko understood *why* her heart felt like crap. And her mood, whatever remained of her confidence after pulling off the hardest Seiken, went straight into the gutter.

"Oh, come on!"

Her eyes narrowed bit by bit as her lips pulled into an infuriated snarl. This was fucking bullshit! Even after getting hit by something as powerful as Shock, the Heartless didn't have a single scratch on its goddamn face

Even if it was strong as shit, getting hit by something as powerful as Shock should've sent it flying backwards.

"You've gotta be kidding -"

Hundreds of pinpricks stopped her mid-rant.

"Oh crap!"

She didn't bother thinking. She didn't waste time on 'should I throw up another barrier or try blocking with Threadcutter.'

At the exact moment hundreds of crazy powerful lasers came gunning for her fucking ass, each packing enough of a wallop to knock her down for the count and then some, adrenaline flushed through her veins. She grunted, expressing her frustration and irritation in the only way she knew - reaction. Drenched by bitterly cold rain and buffeted by darkness powerful enough to rip flesh from bone, pure physical strength launched her off the Cloud of Darkness. A flex of her knees... toes momentarily curling inside soaked sneakers... carried her away from the Heartless.

"Shit!"

Ephemeral four-pointed stars bearing an intense variation of the vermilion undertone permeating her matted hair shimmered around Threadcutter as the Keyblade left her fingers.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!"

Water dripped from razor-sharp wings, evaporating underneath the immense pressure and heat, as she grabbed the only handlebar

within reach and *squeezed*.

"GOD! DAMN! IT!"

Every word was emphasized. Every syllable carried the full weight of her intensifying disdain and annoyance towards the Cloud of Darkness as deep blue light exploded from beneath her Keyblade's chassis. Holding onto the interworld glider sporting predominantly gold coloration punctuated by ruby highlights, traces of black painted along the razor-sharp curves and angles, Ryuko swung herself onto Threadcutter, leaned forward, blew a single bang of matted hair out of her eyes and kicked everything into high gear.

"That bitch is starting to REALLY piss me the hell off!"

When the barriers separating worlds from one another disintegrated, relatively safe travel via gummi ships became possible if you ignored swarms of flying Heartless, chunks of rock bigger than Lindblum's Grand Castle and other hazards. Like a goddamn space whale sucking up everything in its path like a fucking vacuum.

But nobody needed to spend years learning advanced magic or stumble across a Star Shard or be worthy of a Keyblade to wander the realm of light.

The horizon was the limit. Imagination an endless road of meandering possibilities. Or any of the dozen other stupid proverbs Steiner took time *and* energy, and just a little too much enthusiasm, sprinkling throughout her training back. Trying to *dent* his fucking armor had been hard enough. It was tougher than orichalcum! But listening to him philosophize about light, darkness and connections between hearts while Beatrix sat nearby, reading a book without a care in the world, only glancing up when Steiner effortlessly knocked her flat onto her ass, had made her blood boil.

Lightning *slammed* into the ground in front of Threadcutter, forcing her to juke sharply to the right.

She had a gummi ship. She used her gummi ship. She'd nearly crashed her gummi ship on more than one occasion, usually because something was distracting her.

But Threadcutter was her heart.

And her heart was Threadcutter.

She liked to believe things never changed.

That it was possible to take a deep breath, sit down, smile and go back to the way things used to be.

But the world didn't work like that.

It never had.

The heart wasn't static. It wasn't some marble statue for birds to shit on. It changed. It grew. Memories engraved themselves onto one's heart. Every connection introduced another knot in the bridge of red strings connecting the universe. Friends. Family. Hell, the smarmy bastards who deserved getting their faces turned into bloody smears on your knuckle. The heart never truly forgot what's important. Even if someone you loved more than anything in the universe, who sacrificed themselves to save your life when you wanted nothing more than to hold on and never let go, was no longer around, it was impossible to move on and pretend they never existed.

A fragment of their heart, no matter how small or insignificant, remained behind.

Rain splashed against Ryuko's face as her sneakers pressed against the rough calligraphy replacing the Honnouji Academy symbol once etched upon Threadcutter's chassis. Two kanji mixed together yet easily identifiable.

Senketsu.

"Shit!"

The azure light pulsing from Threadcutter intensified as she soared beyond the island's edge, sucking in heaping mouthfuls of disgusting air. Flying above the infinite darkness lurking hundreds of feet below, cold water dripping from her matted hair onto her face, she wove around floating debris, hoping to knock more than a handful of beams off her trail. Explosion after explosion illuminated the darkness. More than one particle beam passed close enough to her skin that she could literally *smell* the burning darkness. But it wasn't enough. There were too many lasers shooting through the darkness. And they were fast.

A lot faster than she remembered.

"ALRIGHT!!!"

A twist of the handlebars immediately reversed Threadcutter's momentum. The razor-sharp wings on either side of her sneakers shifted forward. The energy blasting from the chassis turned bright vermilion. And pulling upwards as hard as possible, grunting and snarling all the way, she forced the glider into a tight corkscrew.

"THAT DOES IT!!!"

Leaning forward until her chin nearly touched her Keyblade, she reversed course at breakneck speed, darkness shifting into familiar rock and crystal.

"YOU LIKE LASERS!?"

She flew low to the ground, kicking up dust and dirt in her wake. Rain slammed against her face. The wind burned her eyes. Her clothes were soaked nearly to the bone. The particle beams were still following her. One exploding inches from Threadcutter, blasting her neck and arms with superheated fire and smoke. But she kept on target, narrowed eyes focused on the massive Heartless looming in front of her.

"WELL GUESS WHAT!?"

Releasing both handlebars at the very last second, she flipped backwards, planted both feet against Threadcutter and *pushed*.

"HERE THEY ARE!!!"

The particle beams were moving too fast to change direction. Which was the goddamn point. As her Keyblade slammed into the unsuspecting Heartless, one after another, the lasers followed. Again. And again. And again. More times than she could count. Explosions blanketed the darkness within a boiling ocean of orange-yellow destruction. The superheated air dispelled the rain, leaving her high and dry hundreds of feet above the ground.

For a brief moment, Ryuko swore she heard the Heartless scream.

"Heh..."

Was she getting a little too cocky? Maybe.

But as Threadcutter flashed into her fingers, not a scratch on its blade, she raised her left hand, middle finger extended towards the searing flames surrounding the Heartless, "... take *that*, bitch!"

Rain fell atop her face as she forced a mirthless chuckle.

The wind whistled into her ears.

Her smile slowly yet steadily vanished when something brushed against her heart.

She couldn't see anything.

But that didn't mean she couldn't sense the monumental amount of bullshit darkness gathering into a goddamn point between the Cloud of Darkness's obscured hands.

"OH NO!!!"

The thought of *blocking* whatever was about to happen never crossed Ryuko's mind. She was crazy, not stupid! The moment - shit, the very instant - her heart picked up something incomprehensibly wrong, her mind emptied itself of distractions. Her heart leapt into her throat. Goosebumps spread down her arms and neck. A faint voice in her head, familiar yet different, shouted into her deafened ears. It wasn't easy. But pushing against platforms of solidified magic and light that didn't exist until that exact moment, Ryuko propelled herself towards the ground.

SHWOOM!!!

Momentarily blinded by the cataclysmic *boom* of supercharged darkness shattering reality in its wake, she instinctively curled her body. She drew both knees to her chest. Threadcutter found itself propped in front of her wincing eyes, skin blackening from the heat.

KA-BOOM!!!

Almost too fast to comprehend, the purplish-green beam - several dozen times larger than anything she'd experienced and erupting from the Cloud of Darkness's hands - missed by scant inches, avoided only by the instincts screaming into her ears.

"The... hell...?"

An unnerved gasp slipped between her teeth. She'd seen the memories more times than she cared to remember. Witnessed the Heartless's monstrous power. But as she fell towards the ground, eyes widening to the point of sheer absurdity, one thought screeched louder than the rest, "How did Beatrix deflect something like THIS!?"

It seemed impossible.

And yet, staring her in the goddamn face, was the evidence.

Then the horizon exploded into a pastiche of colors.

"Holy... crap..."

Illuminated by searing darkness and buffeted by ice-cold rain penetrating straight into her heart, leaving her fingers and toes numb, the absurd power released in the blink of an eye nearly destroyed her confidence. Her bravado faltered beneath the particle cannon passing overhead, turning darkness into a disturbing kaleidoscope of conflicting colors and sounds that physically grated against existence itself. How the hell could she fight something like this? It was impossible! She had to find Gilgamesh and escape before the Heartless managed to get another lucky shot.

"Tch!"

With a guttural growl reaching the furthest depths of her heart, she crumpled those cowardly thoughts into a ball, threw them over her shoulder and landed on the ground, one knee sinking several inches into the muddy dirt.

"What the hell am I thinking!?"

Shame and embarrassment twisted her expression into something ugly. Her fingers angrily tightened around Threadcutter, bitterly cold water running between blanching knuckles in rivulets. What the hell? What the hell was wrong with her? Did she seriously just think about running away? Maybe she couldn't defeat the Heartless. Maybe it was too strong to take down by herself. But she couldn't give two shits about something that goddamn absurd! Everybody was counting on her and Mickey to close the Door to Darkness. If she turned and fled at the first sign of trouble, the Heartless would continue destroying worlds until nothing remained but darkness.

And she'd never be able to look herself in the eyes.

"Fuck... you... !"

The temperature was quickly dropping. Her breath was nearly visible, escaping in pale wisps quickly consumed by the pouring rain.

Biting the inside of her cheek until coppery blood filled her mouth, she punctuated every word with an intensity reserved for only a handful of people. It had to be the Cloud of Darkness messing with her heart. Because there was no way she would *think* about running away from a fight! At least, not without giving one hundred and ten percent!

"You think you can mess with my fricking heart!?"

Blood trickled from her mouth as the particle beam tapered off, resuming a silence all too deafening, "I'm gonna tear you apart until there's nothing left!"

She hadn't expected the Cloud of Darkness to answer. And it didn't. Because it was a Heartless. A monster that couldn't think or talk or do anything other than seek out Keyholes and consume hearts. Yet when it reared its right arm backwards, shadows oozing between clenched fingers, amber eyes narrowing ever-so-slightly and taut muscles visibly bulging, Ryuko stiffened. Not long enough to get punched by a fist larger than her house. For one or two heartbeats, tongue dragging against parched lips, her eyes widened at the familiar expression etched upon the previously emotionless façade.

BOOM!!!

It felt like Ragyo Kiryuin gleefully punching her in the face.

Planting one sneaker firmly into the mud, she reacted as quickly as humanly possible. Threadcutter swung towards the approaching fist. But it wasn't enough. Not by a goddamn long shot. The *moment* her Keyblade connected with the Cloud of Darkness, light and darkness exploding across the landscape as alternating kaleidoscopes of white and black, every bone in her arms, shoulders and upper body shattered. Toned, lithe muscles tore themselves apart. Her head snapped forward, neck breaking underneath the monstrous strength.

It took everything - absolutely everything - to not black out.

"Hrrrrwrrwrr!"

Spittle dribbled down her chin, stained bright crimson by the frothy blood gushing between her clenched teeth.

"Gah... ah... hurk!"

And then the excruciating pain vanished, courtesy of the Life Fibers stuffed inside her body.

"Raagh... come... on..."

With one hand desperately propped against Threadcutter itself, she pushed everything into holding back the Cloud of Darkness's preposterous strength. A vein bulged on her forehead as rain-soaked cheeks blushed. Life Fibers or not, the mounting strain was wreaking havoc on her body. Muddied fingers, burnt skin clinging to newly-regenerated flesh, clenched the gold and ruby Keyblade with sufficient physical strength that another weapon - legendary or otherwise - besides the Scissor Blades would have already shattered. But without agony clouding her heart and mind, there was nothing stopping her from focusing on the only thing that mattered.

"Hnn!"

But it was still goddamn difficult!

"Ugh!"

Her sneakers steadily slipped in the mud, carving lengthening divots. In response, pushing through the metabolic torture of her muscles burning and fingers cramping, Ryuko lurched forward, lips pulled into an enraged and infuriated snarl. She wanted to curse. To shout. To scream. But she didn't. She refused. And for one reason. If the Cloud of Darkness possessed some rudimentary intelligence... if it could actually think, which was another problem in the long run... like HELL would she give it the satisfaction of knowing it was pissing her the hell off.

"Grr...."

But as she fought tooth and nail to stand her ground, one misstep from losing her heart to something that didn't deserve anything more than a half-focused snort while Threadcutter carved it a new asshole, she finally understood why everybody and their fricking masters thought the Cloud of Darkness was invincible. That didn't mean it was. Just that if things had gone slightly different at the beginning, she would have *loved* throwing the Heartless against Ragyo Kiryuin and seeing who won.

"Gah! DAMN IT!"

Throwing caution to the wind, she dove into the deepest depths of her heart, searching for that inner light.

"Hrrr!"

Something brushed against her mind.

"Huh?"

The darkness-tainted rain matting her feathery hair against her forehead and neck, running down her back in cold rivulets, unexpectedly paused, as if somehow caught between two moments. She tried moving only to realize she couldn't. She tried breathing only to realize her heart and lungs had stopped working. And yet, for some strange reason, her heart and mind were moving at the speed of light. As time slowed to an agonizing crawl, individual raindrops laced with shadow dropped one by one in front of her face, she caught the slightest glimpse of vermilion pushing away the darkness. A blindingly bright radiance similar to the nonsensical holy bullshit appearing around Satsuki whenever something sets off her sister.

Yet at the exact spot where Threadcutter struggled against the Cloud of Darkness... light and darkness clashing with no true victor... an unsettling presence touched the deepest abyss.

"What the fu-"

She never finished.

As the curse passed through her parted lips, clinging to a tongue not quite certain what it was saying, an omnidirectional explosion smashed against her heart.

The unrelenting power shoved every last particle of oxygen out of the immediate area, sucking the air out of her lungs and causing her mind to momentarily blank. Caught within the whirlwind of destruction, the storm vanished into chaotic mixtures of blue, green and two other colors that defied explanation. As waves upon waves of the strange energy introduced an entirely new definition to the meaning of pain, far beyond anything she could remember experiencing, the ground shattered. Existence itself seemed to crack and break underneath the strain.

And right before passing out, beneath the agony of her Life Fibers literally *burning*, an unholy wail rattled the darkness.

Last edited: Nov 20, 2019

Chapter 16.1

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 16 - Every Breath You Take

"That's why he summoned you?"

Having forgone her usual attire for something more appropriate, Beatrix's sole eye narrowed ever-so-slightly. It would take but an instant. An afterthought. Before whoever believed themselves capable of such atrocities could blink, she'd be clad in armor. Save the Queen prepared to inflict lasting damage to body and pride. Steiner more than capable of assisting in defending Her Majesty and Alexandria.

"Among other things, yes."

As she marched forward, the *clack-snap* of her heeled boots and toes echoing softly against weathered cobblestone with a noticeable metallic *clank*, she absentmindedly pulled the knitted scarf closer to her neck.

"It's quite an extraordinary request, even considering the unprecedented circumstances."

The seasons had changed. And quickly at that. Unbearable summer heat trapped by the western mountains gave way to autumn. The air possessed a certain bitterness heralding not snow, for it was still far too warm, but freezing rain accompanied by thick fog and heavy mist. Once beautiful gardens and topiaries desperately clung to life. Vibrant greens faded to oranges, reds and yellows. Leaves clung to slumbering trees, held on by dry and dead stems. The world itself seemed to wilt. Yet even with the heavy weight of winter and the constant threat posed by Heartless, despite having locked the

Keyhole to Alexandria herself, the citizens rejoiced. For it was only a matter of time until spring returned. And with it, a renewal of life.

Yet her expression tightened, consternation and annoyance caused her to shake her head.

"If Yen Sid thinks he can demand such an audacious request, perhaps *he* should once more don the mantle of master."

At her side, marching at a pace matching her own despite wearing heavy rusted armor *clanking* with every movement, large or small, Adelbert Steiner's thoughts remained vigilant.

"Perhaps you should consider his point of view."

His nose itched. Quite badly. But it couldn't be allergies. For it wasn't summer. And he didn't have allergies. At least, none that he knew of, "Instructing another young mind shouldn't be too difficult after Ryuko's tutelage, unorthodox and hastened as it might have been."

"Ryuko was special."

Goosebumps raced down Beatrix's arm as the hazy sun hanging over Alexandria vanished behind wispy clouds, "I did not need to introduce an innocent and naïve heart to the complex moralities governing light and darkness. She understood how deep one could sink into the abyss without another hand to guide them back to the light. I saw it in her eyes. While I do not know the details, nor will I broach the subject without consent, Ryuko's experienced far worse pain and suffering than either you or I could possibly fathom."

"You mustn't blame yourself!"

A heavy sigh escaped through Steiner's nose. He knew what - or rather, who - Beatrix was referring to. Nui Harime. Ragyo Kiryuin. Two names Satsuki had divulged to Beatrix during an exceptionally heavy and bitterly cold winter storm. It seemed inconceivable monsters such as them not only existed but had been allowed to run

rampant for so long! Why, if he'd only known Ryuko's world had been overrun by such horrendous individuals, he would have personally led every Keyblade Master, wizard and fabled hero to bring them to justice no matter the cost.

"There might have been some bumps along the way, but your influence upon Ryuko has been undoubtedly positive!"

Coughing in his hand, he took a moment to regain his composure, "It was thanks to your guidance she's matured into a fine and respectable master!"

"My guidance?"

It was almost ephemeral, a subtle snort drawing the taller knight's attention, "Your humility is truly limitless."

"Nonsense."

Adelbert Steiner dismissed the compliment, genuine and heartfelt as it was, without prejudice, "I merely improved her swordsmanship. Anyone could have done that. It was you, not me, who taught Ryuko everything she knows about the Keyblade. I might have assisted in her training from time to time, but my influence cannot begin comparing with yours. Which is why I worry about Alexandria's future."

"The future?"

An amused chuckle whistled between Beatrix's lips, "I'm not dead yet."

"I... uh..."

Her noncommittal comment physically flustered Steiner. Embarrassed by the horrendous insinuation, true or otherwise, his suggestion might have invoked, every muscle in his body simultaneously stiffened, paralyzed beneath shame and

mortification. His mouth opened and closed several times, tongue as dry as cotton, as he abruptly stopped walking. But before falling behind Beatrix, who hadn't paused her gait, he shook his head, collected his courage and resumed a faster-than-average sprint, armor *clanking* every time his feet touched the ground.

Clank! Clank! Clank!

"Of course not! You're more than capable of single-handedly protecting -"

Once again, he stopped.

"Oh, um..."

His compliment dissolved into raspy grunts and coughs. Curse his tongue! Why couldn't he speak clearly and concisely? Fidgeting in place, tongue dragging against his lips as excuses and errant justifications for the mistaken figure of speech passed through his mind one after another, he hurried after Beatrix, "I didn't mean to imply anything erroneous!"

"It should not have been this way."

The sleeve hanging from her shoulder fluttered in the wind. It was empty. As it had been for little more than the last decade. She allowed it to hang down, brushing against her waist as late autumn whispered throughout Alexandria. Yet for the briefest of instants, for the first time in what must have been countless months, a slight twitch of pain radiated from the scarred flesh, "There should have been five masters."

A certain hardness steadily encroached upon her heart, guilt and frustration mixing together until she didn't know where one ended and the other began.

"Five new hearts dedicated to protecting the worlds."

Every terrible event over the last ten years - the Heartless, worlds succumbing to darkness, Maleficent learning of the princesses - could be traced to Xehanort. The man's treacherous ambitions and desire for power had shattered peace and tranquility sustained for hundreds of years. Kingdom Hearts. The X-Blade. The Cloud of Darkness. So much ruined and tainted by someone she once trusted with her heart and life.

"Which only makes Ryuko's selfishness all the more appalling!"

His voice remained steady, even as frustration seeped into his tone. Respect, mutual or otherwise, did not immunize anything from criticism. Especially well-deserved criticism. If the situation was reversed, he harbored little doubt Ryuko would utter every banal and tedious issue she had with him. And he would expect nothing less from her.

"Tradition dictates - no, demands - she accept such duties."

Granted, while her decision had been undoubtedly self-centered and narcissistic, he could not ignore how much good Ryuko's accomplished. Ardyn Lucis Caelum no longer corrupted the worlds with his eldritch presence. Kingdom Hearts did not fall into Xehanort's hands. Maleficent is too unnerved to step into the light, severely limited the witch's strategies. Nui Harime was dead, albeit with massive collateral damage to the old growth forests surrounding Twilight Town. Her persistence in the face of incalculable odds had saved the realm of light more times than he could possibly count.

"But we *both* know that's never going to happen. You'd have more luck clearing the heavens above Burmecia than convincing her into doing anything she does not wish to do."

Yet that did not excuse her selfish choice!

Clank! Clank! Clank!

"I never expected Ryuko to follow in my footsteps."

Running her fingers through voluminous chestnut brown hair, thumb and forefinger gripping an errant strand, Beatrix's sole eye softly narrowed, crinkling the silver eye patch covering the right side of her face. Eraqus had watched over the Land of Departure, ensuring light and darkness remained balanced, neither stronger than the other. It had been a responsibility passed down by his master. And his master before him. An unbreakable chain of masters stretching back to Scala ad Caelum, a world she'd never visited yet Master Celes had described in vivid and wonderous detail.

Their duties could not have been more different.

"And it would have been wrong to force her into making such a choice."

She, on the other hand, did not stay her blade against those who'd subjugate innocent hearts and minds for nothing more than ephemeral power. Instead of growing complicit in the security provided by peace and prosperity, she investigated every rumor of darkness. Sometimes she was wrong. And sometimes she was right. But until Ansem's machinations lured them into the light, Heartless incursions had been rare. No more than one or two dozen Heartless at a time. But there was always someone - man or woman - whose darkened heart drew the creatures in large numbers. Swarms of writhing shadows seeking more hearts to consume until nothing remained but endless darkness and misery.

For years, since first stepping foot off Alexandria, she'd been successful.

"But make no mistake."

Yet it had been her greatest failure - believing Xehanort expressed remorse over his infatuation with Kingdom Hearts and the ancient war - that brought her and Ryuko together.

"Ryuko *will* protect Alexandria. Just like she'll protect every world."

As a fallen branch snapped beneath the weight of her boots, breaking into several pieces scattered across the maintained cobblestone path, she stared at Steiner, meeting the man's gaze, "As for that tradition? Queen Brahne once said - 'those worthy of the Keyblade's power have a duty to protect *all* worlds, not merely Alexandria.'"

"What?"

Steiner balked at the unexpected mention of Queen Garnet's late mother, a humble woman dearly missed more than thirteen years after her passing. Nearly stumbling into a rosebush and falling face-first into thorns, his mouth fell open in shock, "Her Majesty's mother said that!?"

"It was not long after Regent Cid connected our world to Lindblum and Burmecia," Beatrix answered with noticeable melancholy and nostalgia, "She'd recently returned from touring Lindblum. She'd been so enraptured by the Grand Castle's majesty... so entranced by Burmecia's architecture and their resiliency... that she immediately ordered I protect all worlds from darkness, not merely Alexandria."

"I -"

Words failed to form in Steiner's heart, "Why did you never tell me this!?"

"Because it wasn't important."

A somber smile, sadness clinging to the corners of her mouth yet with warmth keeping her expression upbeat, answered his question, "And I knew if the worst came to pass... if I could not defend Alexandria to my dying breath... Her Majesty would still have you."

"I am but one man!"

Clank! Clank! Clank!

"And I am but one woman."

She didn't think. She breathed softly, in and out, vapor clinging to her tongue like smoke. Amusement graced her answer. In an enticing blossoming of pearlescent rose and pink light impossible to describe, Save the Queen materialized. And just as quickly, the Keyblade vanished, leaving warmth and perseverance brushing against their hearts, "A Keyblade doesn't define one's ability to fight. I could just as easily defend Alexandria with Excalibur as I could Save the Queen."

"Yes... well... you are an exceptional woman."

A blush stood prominent on the knight's face as he stared suspiciously hard at a tree down the path, "Which is why I must begrudgingly insist you consider Master Yen Sid's proposal."

"Ah."

Her breath wasn't quite visible. Not yet. The seasons had not yet changed enough. But with her lips quirked into a smile, she folded her arm underneath her bosom, "Do you remember those children from Destiny Islands?"

The innocuous question utterly baffled Steiner.

"Children?"

Sweltering temperatures that caused sweat to drip down his neck, humidity high enough that it felt like he was standing inside a sauna, too many biting insects to count. He'd stepped foot upon the tropical archipelago twice. Which was two times too many. He was a knight sworn to defend crown and kingdom. What if some dastardly monster attacked Alexandria while he was swimming?! And yet, upon Her Majesty's insistence... and Beatrix promising to protect the world until his return... he'd begrudgingly acquiesced. If only for a few hours.

It hadn't been that bad.

It might have been somewhat pleasant and enjoyable if not for that arrogant, disrespectful and belligerent fisherman. Simply remembering that fool made his blood boil!

Him? Sir Auron's personal chauffeur!?

If he didn't have an even-tempered disposition, he would have forced Jecht to apologize for uttering such baseless slander!

But children?

"Not that I can recall."

The question remained at the forefront of his thoughts. It boggled him. And as they reached the innermost gardens located beyond the castle's eastern tower, past an open gate and several guards, ivy rotting on wrought iron fixtures and once beautiful flowerbeds reduced to empty plots against winter's relentless approach, he scratched his chin, fingers rubbing against fresh stubble, "Are you suggesting -"

"I haven't decided anything."

She interrupted with a shake of her head, voluminous hair bouncing from the motion, "One of them has potential. But potential, as you're aware, means nothing. Whether they meet my expectations, on the other hand, however, is an entirely different question. Normally I would not care. Everyone has potential. Some more than others. But through means which elude me, this child's heart has been touched by a Keyblade. An accidental Bequeathing."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes."

Purplish-red narrowed alongside furrowing brows, "But it couldn't have been Ryuko. Of that I'm quite certain. She might be many

things, but irresponsible is not one of them. I taught her better than that. One of the few lessons she's taken to heart."

"I see."

Unbothered by Beatrix's ersatz indifference towards what should have been a serious misdemeanor, Steiner nodded, "Well, as long as they're respectful and considerate, there's little reason to worry."

A soft hum escaped the swordswoman's suddenly quirked lips, "Perhaps."

"What does that mean?"

"Ryuko's visited those islands more than any of us. She's well-liked by the children. They look up to her."

Leaves crunched underneath her boots as Beatrix allowed her words to momentarily hang upon the bitter air. In front of them, a four-winged marble relief, arms spread upwards and sword bearing resemblance to Excalibur clasped between its fingers, stood watch over Alexandria and her children. This was a sanctuary. A refuge from the general public open only to Queen Garnet and a handful of servants and guards. Herself and Steiner included. More time passed as she stood perfectly still, autumn biting at exposed skin and mouth twitching from anticipation.

"At such young ages, one's heart is impressionable. Even the slightest influence can alter it."

With every carefully chosen word, the horror in Steiner's eyes deepened.

"I shall not argue Ryuko has matured. Or that her... vernacular... hasn't improved dramatically. Satsuki's influence has undoubtedly been beneficial."

Fully aware of the reaction her words were having, Beatrix turned around, heading away from the garden towards the castle proper while the knight remained paralyzed, "But if she's been to those islands as much as we know, odds are one or two of the children picked up some of her bad habits, don't you agree? Dare I say, they might want to be just like her."

"I... uh... well..."

"It's as you said..."

The scars crisscrossing her right shoulder momentarily itched as she patted Steiner's back, "Instructing another young mind shouldn't be too difficult after Ryuko. Weren't those your exact words?"

Last edited: Nov 27, 2019

Chapter 16.2

She never considered that one day, sooner or later, she'd reached the stars. They always felt so far away. Like they didn't exist and were nothing more than lights in the sky. Everybody claimed there was no air in space. That nobody could survive without a spacesuit. And maybe that was true. Maybe. But she wasn't a normal teenager. It was probably because of her Life Fibers. Or Senketsu. Or sheer stubbornness. Whatever the reason, she couldn't care less.

The only thing that mattered was bringing down Ragyo Kiryuin and getting back to Mako in time for their special date.

"Aw, what's the matter?"

Which would have been a lot easier if her dad's scissors didn't bounce off her mom's gaudy-as-hell dress.

"You know the blades of your scissors are made of hardened Life Fibers. And when absolute submission is activated, all Life Fibers become powerless against it."

She couldn't give two shits about absolute submission or domination or whatever her mom called it. Screw that bullshit! If Shinra Koketsu was really that powerful, she just needed to hit the damn thing harder and faster. Simple as that! Nothing in the world invincible. Not her. Not Senketsu. And certainly not Nui Harime! Everyone that claimed Senketsu couldn't so much as scratch their 'badass uniform' had been proven wrong. She'd demolished Satsuki's entire goddamn academy of brownnosing extracurricular clubs. She took down the fricking Elite Four. And more important than any of those things, she wiped that annoying smile off Nui's face.

Nothing was impossible!

But her mom's smugness was really starting to piss her the hell off!

"What?"

Golden radiance danced alongside crimson incandescence. Multicolored warmth haphazardly stitched into the beautiful tapestry by the weight of her determination and stubbornness staved off the cold vacuum of space. Yet a shiver raced down her spine. It was hard separating from her mom's normal, over-the-top psychotic arrogance. The sort of confidence which made her knuckles crack. But it was there, lurking underneath that malevolent smile.

Hatred.

The sort of hatred impossible for any normal person to feel.

"You turned your blade against this grand cloth! The equal to any god! And for that..."

When the gaudy dress, nowhere near as good as Senketsu, rippled like wet clothes in the laundry, her mouth twisted into a snarl. Multi-ringed eyes so much like Senketsu's yet lacking his compassion and humanity - everything that made him more than another outfit to be worn - warped into obscene shapes as Ragyo's smile widened. She tried blocking. She parried until her muscles started burning. Her dad's scissors devolved into crimson blurs as she and Senketsu worked together, movements and Life Fibers synchronized to something far above perfection.

But it wasn't enough.

Her mom and Shinra Koketsu were faster.

Much, much faster.

"... you must be PUNISHED!!!"

She didn't feel anything more than a strange numbness. But she wasn't complaining. As the ugly-as-crap dress drove spikes into her stomach, blood spraying through the cold vacuum of space and

erupted out the other side, all that escaped her gasping lips was an annoyed grunt. Life Fibers were bullshit. Everything about them was bullshit. But not feeling agonizing pain after becoming an involuntary pincushion?

That was fine in her book.

"RYUKO!!! ARE YOU OKAY!?"

It didn't take much to recover her balance.

Or coordination.

Her wounds sealed themselves shut nearly instantaneously. As she fell towards the world teetering on the brink of becoming an ugly-as-shit sweater of Life Fibers, Senketsu's panicked voice resonated loud and clear inside her heart. And accompanied by an amazing burst of gold and ruby light, their descent towards the stitched blanket transformed into a roundabout secondary launch aimed straight for Ragyo Kiryuin.

"Yeah, I'm good."

Wearing Senketsu felt like basking in the warmth of the summer sun.

Or curled up in a blanket next to Mako on a cold night.

His power flowed through her veins. Electricity replaced her blood. He'd always been kickass. Hell, she'd call him the most badass sailor uniform in the world and mean every goddamn word. But Kisaragi redefined everything. Like she'd been sleeping for seventeen years and only opened her eyes a few minutes ago. His strength was unbelievable. It felt as if there was nothing they couldn't do. Nobody they couldn't take down. Nobody they couldn't protect from people like Ragyo Kiryuin.

But more important than something as pointless as power, she and Senketsu had finally become one.

She was no longer wearing him.

And he was no longer being worn by her.

"Just caught me off guard!!!"

Over and over, faster and faster, she threw everything against Ragyo Kiryuin. Her mom didn't move. Not like she expected. But the bitch remained utterly motionless, letting her stupid dress block her dad's scissors. And then it happened. It was hard to explain with words. Harder to comprehend outside of simply accepting it. But every time the Scissor Blades slammed against Shinra Koketsu, bouncing off the 'ultimate Kamui's' outer layers alongside multicolored sparks and light, she felt something brush against her heart. As she soared through the empty vacuum of interplanetary space, pivoting and dancing around Shinra Koketsu's fast-as-shit attacks, the feeling grew stronger. And stronger. And stronger.

It had to be her bitch of a mom's Life Fibers.

There was no other explanation.

"Souichiro's dying wish must've been such a burden for you, my dear."

Light and darkness exploded with every subsequent clash.

Burning shadows and abhorrent radiance cascaded against one another, bolstering and intensifying as the diametric primordial powers slammed into the mystical barrier surrounding the ignorant world.

"And yet with all your power you still don't understand the basic principle of the universe!"

Even with Senketsu's upgraded power, smashing the Scissor Blades against Shinra Koketsu was like punching a brick wall. The damned

piece of clothing was tough. Really tough. She'd admit that much. Maybe there was something to absolute submission.

But she could live without Ragyo rubbing it in their goddamn faces.

"Look, Ryuko! That blue world! That shining sun! Those twinkling stars! This is the cosmos! And one day, even this will come to an end."

A writhing miasma of pure darkness exploded from her mom's blackened heart as painted lips twisted into an insane caricature of motherly affection.

"Since this galaxy was born, creation and destruction have gone hand in hand! The Life Fibers are part of this ecosystem! They are part of the law of the universe!"

Speeches.

Why the hell did everyone feel the need to brag?

"When are you going to shut the HELL up!?"

"How can you be so DENSE? You are my own flesh and blood!"

"It ain't like I was raised by you!"

"Ah, yes. I admit that was a MISTAKE!"

Dozens of spikes pierced every internal organ inside her body.

It didn't hurt any worse than getting lightly punched in the shoulder.

As in, not at all.

But her mom's disturbing definition of punishment was getting really old, really fast. Not to mention fricking lazy. Almost as if demonstrating how 'superior' and 'godly' Shinra Koketsu was compared to Senketsu was the only thing she cared about.

"Tch!"

She knew it would piss off the bitch.

In fact, she was counting on it.

People who got angry made mistakes. And she needed Ragyo to make SOME mistakes if Senketsu was going to cut through Shinra Koketsu.

"Heh..."

Floating halfway between her mom and the blanket of Life Fibers surrounding their world, wounds stitching themselves shut much like Mrs. Mankanshoku expertly fixed Mako's hand-me-down clothes, she metaphorically raised her middle finger.

"You'll have to do better than that if you want to kill me!"

Ragyo's right eye twitched alongside a suddenly somber expression.

"Indeed. I must be subconsciously pulling my punches. It appears I still have a shred of humanity left in me."

An explosion of incomprehensible darkness splashed against the world's barrier as Ragyo's expression turned utterly daemonic.

"OH WELL!!! I'LL JUST RID MYSELF OF IT!!!"

Shinra Koketsu devoured itself, taking whatever tiny scraps remained of her mom's humanity.

In the blink of an eye, the 'ultimate Kamui' changed, turning from something almost like an exaggerated wedding dress to a sleeveless gown. But she and Senketsu didn't have time to consider what that meant. Or the maniacal glint in her mom's monstrous eyes.

"AND NOW YOU DIE!!!"

Just because getting skewered dozens of times per second hurt as much as Mako's love taps didn't mean she liked it. The discomfort was out of this world. And experiencing her arms and legs reduced to scrapes of Life Fibers and blood only to stitch themselves together as quickly? Feeling spike after spike squish her heart like a grape only for it to return completely restored one heartbeat later?

It pissed her off.

"YOU DON'T GET TO TELL ME WHAT TO DO!!!"

Light blasted from her heart as she shot towards Ragyo Kiryuin, golden radiance matching the kaleidoscopic darkness strength for strength.

"I DECIDE WHEN I DIE!!!"

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/b/b1/EP24_Ry%C5%ABko_SenketsuKisaragi_RendingScissorClose.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/750?cb=20140904213647]

"Ugh..."

As the memories faded, reality knocked with the force of a sledgehammer.

It felt like she'd gone several rounds against Beatrix without the woman holding anything back.

Everything felt sore.

"Give me... a fucking break..."

She'd been dreaming about her mom. Which made no sense. It'd been years since she'd spent more than two seconds thinking about the woman. Ragyo Kiryuin was dead. The bitch killed herself. She *watched* Ragyo rip out her own heart, spew some cryptic bullshit about Life Fibers eventually coming back, crush the twisted organ

and dissolve into fading strands of second-hand fabric. Nobody came back from something like that. At least, she used to think along those lines until Nui Harime appeared out of nowhere. But if her mom somehow survived crushing her heart into pulp and Life Fibers, she was doing a damn good job staying under the radar.

"Why the hell is it so bright?"

Even laying face-down in the sand, blood dribbling from her mouth and forehead, it was *bright*. Too damn bright. As soon as she opened her eyes, she slammed them shut, groaning out several muffled curses. This couldn't be the realm of darkness. The place was a desolate hellscape devoid of anything resembling hope. There was no *sun* inside the darkness. Just an eerily hazy moon pointing the way back towards the light. Damn it! Had something knocked her clear across reality?

Question after question passed through her mind without so much as an answer.

She didn't know anything.

And she understood even less.

But then the memories - and why she was lying on some foreign beach feeling like utter shit - returned.

"God damn it!"

She *really* hated this particular Heartless.

In the span of a second, Ryuko's expression shifted from confusion to annoyance before settling upon righteous indignation. Sand stuck to her matted hair, soaked and dripping from the thunderstorm clinging to the Cloud of Darkness's existence like an overprotective parent, as she opened her eyes, forcing them to acclimate to the sunlight. Goddamn it. Countering that punch must've sent her flying clear out of the darkness and onto some random world on the far

side of the realm of light from Alexandria. It was too cold to be Agrabah, Destiny Islands or the other desert-like worlds she could remember off the top of her head.

No.

The midsummer sun might've fooled most people, but she could sense the darkness beneath the surface. This was still the realm of darkness. Which meant the Heartless's attack had sent her flying clear across the dimension, leaving her strand as far away from the Door to Darkness as possible.

"Shit."

An ocean of endless shadows lurking around the corner trying to worm its way into her heart. But she easily pushed them away. Spitting out a mouthful of sand, some of which clung to her tongue, she propped her left arm underneath her body and slowly began the arduous process of picking herself off the ground. Or, at the least, she tried recovering what little remained of her dignity.

Because most of her right arm was gone.

She stared long enough at the glowing wound to notice two things. First, everything below her elbow was scattered across the universe. And two, there wasn't a drop of blood staining the sand.

"Uuuuggggghhh...."

And then slammed her forehead against the ground.

"*Really* should've seen this coming."

Even if it didn't hurt, not having an arm felt weird.

Not 'weird' weird.

Just... weird.

Like it had fallen asleep and refused to wake up.

This wasn't the first time she'd lost an arm or leg punching out some godforsaken monster. And knowing her luck, it probably wouldn't be the last. And the numbness meant absolute shit. Maybe it was Life Fiber bullshit. It was probably Life Fiber bullshit. If she wanted to bore herself to death with the details, she'd ask Satsuki or Inumuta. Then punch herself in the face for asking something that fricking stupid. But no matter what happened, losing an arm or getting stabbed through the gut or someone shooting part of her head always hurt less than a papercut, sunburns or bruises.

The *real* question sewing existential dread into her heart was why her arm hadn't already regenerated from whatever caused it to explode across the darkness.

"Don't panic."

If anything, saying 'don't panic' only made her feel worse.

Did this have anything to do with her dream? Or the Heartless?

Spitting out a mouthful of sand before the disgusting stuff could get stuck between her teeth, she flopped onto her back, took a deep breath and stared straight at the sun. For what could only be described as hovering somewhere between an exceptionally long time and the blink of an eye, she didn't move an inch. She simply lied on the beach, matted hair slowly drying in the sunlight and eyes firmly shut. Odd. It looked like summer on this world. It felt like summer. And yet she couldn't feel any warmth. Almost like the sun was nothing more than whatever remained of the world remembering what it once was.

"If you chop them off, they'll just pop right back on again!"

"UGH!!!"

The annoying voice popped into her heart out of nowhere, shattering her concentration. She tried drowning it out. She tried thinking about other things. Like how she would get back to Gogo and Gilgamesh. But nothing worked. Nui Harime's insidious laughter was firmly etched onto her heart.

"Screw that psychotic bitch!"

Twelve years.

After spending more than twelve years investigating every square inch of her body, she'd discovered quite a few tricks. Nothing like the bullshit Ragyo Kiryuin and Nui always seemed to pull out of their asses. She couldn't make clones. Or stitch Life Fibers into other people's brains and control them like puppets. And her fashion sense sucked worse than ever. But she *could* bulldoze through magic without breaking a sweat. If she screwed something up, it wouldn't take long to get back onto her feet. If someone sliced off her arm, she could just pop it back on and punch them in the face.

But this felt different.

This was different.

And hearing Nui Harime's mocking voice wasn't helping the situation.

"Alright."

Laying spread eagle in the middle of an unknown beach underneath a suspiciously lukewarm sun, crimson light pouring from her elbow, mouth pursed into a snarl more than capable of curdling milk, she huffed, blowing a strand of hair off her nose.

"Think."

She was forgetting something. She could feel it. Her fingers - currently gripping handfuls of sand - tingled. Half-forgotten memories whispered against her heart. There were flashes of colors. Images

too broken to make sense. She remembered fighting the Cloud of Darkness, throwing everything including the kitchen sink hoping something worked. Darkness and light clashing against one another. Then nothing until waking up face-down in the sand without most of her right arm. Everything between those two points was a chaotic pastiche of sounds and alien geometries impossible to describe, even to herself.

The only thing she *could* remember was an unsettling blue and green energy.

And her Life Fibers feeling like they were literally on fire.

"Tch!"

But how did that explain her arm?

"No point thinking about it."

It didn't take any effort sitting up.

And when she finally did so, goosebumps tickled her stomach.

"Of course."

Out of everything that could've happened, including running into someone like Ardyn Izunia, this was the least troubling yet most annoying.

And for a damn good reason!

Whatever nonsense went down between herself and the Cloud of Darkness, it left her half-naked. Her jacket was nothing more than tattered scraps hanging onto her shoulders. Her shirt fared little better. Hell, covered in burns and tears, it looked worse. She still had her bra, but it was visible for any pervert to ogle until she pounded their face into a bloody pulp impossible for any amount of magic to fix. As for her pants? They were mostly fine. A few tears and gashes. One or two burns along the thighs. But not too bad.

Oh, and she was missing a sneaker.

"Why did I expect anything different?"

Instinctively reaching towards the necklace brushing against bare skin, she let out a sigh upon feeling two pieces of familiar and warm metal. It could've been worse. A lot worse. But her dad's scissors... the only things she had to remember him by... were still there. And for them, she'd risk getting lost in the darkness. If only temporarily.

"Now..."

With nobody around but unemotional Heartless to sneak peaks of her body, she kicked off her other sneaker, leaving her barefoot on the cold sand, "... where the hell am I?"

It didn't take long.

She should have realized it sooner.

Maybe some part of her heart refused to accept the truth.

But not anymore.

This was the...

"... Destiny Islands!?"

Unable to process everything, her heart dropped into the pit of her stomach. Eyes widening and mouth slightly agape, jaw trembling alongside her heart, she spun around, desperately looking for something - anything - to prove her wrong. A sign this was an illusion or trick of the darkness. But the truth was staring her in the face. This was Besaid Island. Or whatever survived the darkness and Heartless.

"What the hell happened!?"

The question hurt. She could barely breath. How did this happen? The last time she visited, everything had been fine. Nobody vanishing in the middle of the night. No rumors involving strange shadows and weird creatures. No sudden and unexpected visitors. There had been nothing wrong with the world. She made damn certain nothing had been wrong!

So why the hell did the Destiny Islands end up in a messed-up place like this!?

"Uuuuuhhhh..."

With a wordless grimace, she collapsed against a palm tree, the bark rubbing against her bare skin.

This was her fault.

Sora. Riku. Kairi. Tidus. Kaiyo. Hell, even Jecht.

Everyone was gone.

Lost to the darkness.

And now she'd never be able to fulfill her promise.

"God damn -"

Something brushed against her heart.

Something familiar.

"You've got to be kidding me!"

She could see it coming.

Hell, she could *feel* it coming.

On the horizon, beyond the darkness-tainted landscape and jagged rocks belonging nowhere near Besaid Island, storm clouds devoured

sunlight. Pristine blue skies lacking any clouds darkened into a raging maelstrom. Lightning crackled. There was no rain. Not yet. But a bitterly cold wind brushed against her heart. An annoying scent strong enough to nearly make her gag shot up her nose. And for a moment, she imagined the very familiar and very *focused* Heartless sweeping through the realm of darkness straight towards her heart.

"Can't anything go right today!?"

As waves of darkness crashed against her face, she reached into her heart, searching for that familiar strength.

"Fine! Have it your way!"

She hadn't been born a natural lefty. For a long time, holding anything in her left hand had felt awkward. She could barely write her own name without it looking like garbage. Training against Beatrix and Steiner with both halves of her dad's scissors had helped. A lot. Writing her name was still out of the question. And she had trouble snapping her fingers or doing anything fancy.

But swinging Threadcutter?

"And this time, I'm putting you down! Once and for all!"

She could do that in her sleep.

Last edited: Dec 4, 2019

Re:Mind [Mémoires: Première]

Re:Mind [Mémoires: Première]

"Kept you waiting, huh?"

The book nearly fell from her startled fingers.

"You know, I'm *pretty* sure that's not something you should be reading."

When the figure leaned over her right shoulder, features obscured by a black coat and hood staring inquisitively at the information splashed across the pages, she fervently searched for a reasonable excuse for breaking some unforeseen rule, "Oh! Sorry, master, I was just -"

["Relax. I'm kidding."](#)

It was exceptionally difficult to notice. Well, for most people. He, on the other hand, having taught and guided his apprentice for quite some time, recognized every subtle twitch and expression of her heart. She was an open book. And he was the reader. It was how he knew, far beyond any doubt, behind that specially crafted mask resembling an adorable vulpine his youngest student was baffled by his generosity and magnanimity. And a little surprised by his amazing entrance. Which he'd anticipated. After all, she'd probably expected him to march through the front door. Or sneak in through the window after that unfortunate incident involving Aced and Ira planning his surprise birthday party.

Well, really more of an 'attempt' at planning a party.

But teleporting across space and time?

With great care, he ever-so-gently extracted the book from his apprentice's fingers. Not a difficult task considering she was still

numbed into paralysis by his awesome entrance.

"Interesting story, isn't it?"

Running a gloved finger along the dense text opposite a monstrous creature drawn upon the left side of the open book, he found nobody to blame but himself. A book was little more than a means to share knowledge. And this book? Flipping through the pages, an unseen eyebrow steadily raised in the shadows of his hood as memory after memory bubbled to the surface of his heart. This was an important book. Maybe not as important as the Books of Prophecies, which were *more* important. But considering everything that had transpired, is currently happening throughout Daybreak Town and will eventually come to pass upon worlds not yet existing, that was close enough.

"You know..."

The pitter-patter of his boots contained a slight echo, far more than they should have possessed. It reached the furthest shadows. Disrupted the renewed cobwebs lurking throughout dusty beams and illuminated windows. Sheesh, he'd really let this place go to waste. Once they were done talking, he needed to buckle down, roll up his sleeves and scrub this place from top to bottom, "... if you were *that* interested, all you had to do was ask."

"Really?"

"But a word of caution - the information is quite shocking. You might never be able to see your friends in the same light again. Worst case scenario? Your heart falls to darkness."

It took a moment to find where she'd excised the book from his shelves. A quick push of his fingers to make room. And once it was back where it belonged, he turned around, silver chains jingling against his black coat, "That being said, are you still interested? It's not too late to back out."

"Uh..."

Beneath the vulpine mask covering most of her face, two large ears sticking out of the pink hood draped across her shoulder, Ava's mind raced with apprehension, "I'm not sure I - "

"Well, if you insist..."

The clockwork mechanisms constructed throughout the tower relentlessly continued ticking as he sat down in the nearest and only chair, "Oh, by the way, that stuff I said about your heart falling into darkness? I was kidding. There's nothing dangerous about the book."

He expected Ava to say something like 'that's not very funny' or 'you shouldn't joke about something so horrible.' But she didn't say anything. Not a single word. The awkwardness in the room doubled. Then tripled. Then levels previously unmatched since Luxu's unfortunate experience with blind dating. Because Ava's hands were beginning to tremble. An interesting series of emotions were steadily building inside her normally forgiving heart. And thus, leaning forward, chair creaking with noticeable anticipation, he waited until his youngest pupil could no longer bottle her true feelings.

"You shouldn't joke about something so horrible!"

And there it was.

"Yeah... sorry. Got a little carried away."

It wasn't easy scratching one's neck through enchanted fabric. But he'd managed the impossible every day of his life. And this was no exception, "Anyway, you don't need to concern yourself with keeping this secret. You can tell the others everything. I won't stop you. But an actual word of warning - what you're about to hear is extraordinarily embarrassing."

Ava's frustration quelled as quickly as it manifested.

"Embarrassing?"

"Yup. That's right. A big old embarrassment."

His fingers strummed against the desk, mimicking an irritating song that had been stuck in his head for the last few days, "Well, to start things off, you're probably aware the Heartless in that book isn't in the Books of Prophecies I've given you and the others."

"Yes. I did. But why?"

"A very good question."

Folding his arms across his chest, his hood shifted in a way that expressed a deep and pensive nod, "Why do *you* think it's not in the Books of Prophecies?"

Ava's mouth opened for a moment, several questions clinging to her tongue, before she gently caressed her chin, "If it's not in the book, that means you defeated it, right?"

"Yes... and no. It's complicated."

He *could* have afforded giving Ava more than a half-hearted shrug for her question. Perhaps a pat on the back. A thumbs-up. Or that embarrassing series of fist bumps every Keyblade wielder stationed in Daybreak Town seemed to know by heart. But she deserved the truth. Not the whole truth. Just the important details, "The important thing is, that Heartless has a name - the Cloud of Darkness."

"The Cloud of Darkness?"

"Personally, that's too much of a mouthful. So, to keep things simple, let's just call it the 'Void', alright?"

A raised hand interrupted Ava before she could open her mouth. He recognized that look. He could see it in her eyes. Well, not her eyes because of the vulpine mask, but the overall point remained. She had questions. A lot of questions about the Cloud of Darkness. Which was troublesome. Because no matter what information he

divulged about the nightmarish and ancient Heartless, in a couple of hours, days at the most, the others were going to barge into his study demanding answers.

That would be one heck of an awkward conversation.

"I know what you're thinking."

But he staved off such questions with an almost nonchalant wave of his hand, "Why did I not write about this Heartless in the Books of Prophecies? How strong is the Void? How did I successfully vanquish the Heartless, thereby banishing darkness and allowing light to shine across the world?"

Ava's silence, while expected, rocketed the stifling atmosphere straight into uncomfortable tension.

"The answer to all those questions is simple - this Heartless, the Void or Cloud of Darkness or whatever you want to call it, is an exceptionally dangerous Heartless."

He could hear every tick-tock of the clockwork gears and pendulums. It was getting late. Soon enough, the hour hand would reach six, announcing the day's approaching end. It drew out a sigh. Leaning backwards, obscured features furrowing within the dark confines of his hood, he gathered his thoughts. Not the most difficult task. But one made troublesome by memories best forgotten.

"Most people - yourself, included - instinctively fear darkness. You want nothing more than to destroy it. And destroy those wielding it. Sure, there are exceptions. Individuals who've accepted the darkness and whose hearts can no longer be influenced. But more often than not, those who open their hearts to darkness inevitably lose themselves. Yet light cannot exist without darkness. And without light to grant it purpose, darkness would have no meaning. In other words, no matter how many Heartless you destroy or Lux you collect, darkness and light will always exist."

His hand flicked through the air, traces of magic clinging to his gloved fingers.

"If things were perfect, light and darkness would be perfectly balanced. Neither stronger than the other. But reality isn't perfect."

Sitting up, he leaned forward, elbow resting upon his knee.

"And that's why the Void is so dangerous."

There was a certain inquisitiveness in Ava's expression. Sure, Luxu had his bashfulness and social awkwardness. Aced had the enthusiasm to be a leader yet lacked qualities that would make him a *good* leader. And Ira was a bit too much of an idealist. But Ava? Her heart radiated the sort of childish wonder that, once lost, couldn't be recovered, "I'm not quite certain how it works. Which, coming from me, means something. So, if you ask me 'why' or 'how', I can't give you any answers. But the Void's strength is tied to this same balance. As darkness grows stronger, extinguishing light underneath its shadow, or vice versa, the Heartless's strength grows exponentially."

"What?"

"Yeah. Shocking, isn't it? But you don't need to worry. Things are pretty balanced at the moment. Roughly. More or less. So, the Cloud of Darkness - I mean, the Void - is currently at its weakest."

And just like that, he allowed a hint of humor back into his voice.

"But when *I* fought it? Sheesh, talk about a difficult battle. And I mean *difficult*. If not for some quick thinking and sheer luck, I could've died."

"D-Died?"

"Kicked the bucket? Departed for the great beyond? Rejoined the Lifestream?"

Behind her vulpine mask, Ava grimaced, "Are you... telling a joke, master?"

"What!?"

Flinching as if struck by magic powerful beyond mortal comprehension, he lurched backwards before slamming both feet against the floor, "You don't believe I'm telling the truth!?"

"No! Not at all! I mean yes! I mean - "

"Yeah. I know. Hard to believe, isn't it? Your beloved master nearly killed by a Heartless. Talk about embarrassing."

A measure of mischievous amusement clung to his heart as he nonchalantly brushed aside Ava's consternation, "Anyway, long story short, I couldn't kill this Heartless. Nothing I threw at it worked, including a few special tricks I've never shown you. So, since it was practically invincible, I did the next best thing. It took a few tries. I nearly died pulling it off. But using my Keyblade as a special 'key,' I managed to imprison the Void within the realm of darkness. In other words, it's not coming back. Well, for now, at least."

"... for now?"

Ava reached out, paused, drew her hand back and grimaced, "Does that mean the Void will come back?"

"Yeah. That's right."

The slight quivering of her lower lip pierced his heart like a knife.

"Look. Ava. Nothing in this world lasts forever. Not even Ira's grudge against Invi for eating the last golden egg galette. Day fades to night. Life fades to death. Eventually, perhaps far beyond our lifetimes, the Void will eventually claw its way out of the darkness. Nothing can stop it. Not you. Or me. Or anyone. It's better to simply accept that what's going to happen will happen and move on. Understand?"

She did not, in fact, understand.

"I'm... not sure I do."

"Good."

He shrugged, dismissing her confusion without missing a beat, "If you had said 'yes' or 'maybe' or even 'I think so' I would have known you were lying."

"Master, can I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"How do we stop it?"

Fretting to herself, the youngest Foreteller's heart sunk into the pit of her stomach, "I mean, if you couldn't defeat it, how can any of us, even together, do so?"

"You can't."

The sound of his boots hitting the floor was nearly imperceptible. Without so much as a sound, he pushed himself onto his feet, strutting towards the youngest and most innocent of his students, "It's depressing, I'll admit. But even if we worked together, pooling our hearts, light and talents into some combination attack forged by our unbreakable bonds, it wouldn't be enough to destroy the Void."

And right as Ava's head tilted forward, he gently placed his hand upon her shoulder.

"So stop worrying about the future and focus on the present! Just because I couldn't destroy the Void doesn't mean someone else might not figure out a way. It could be you. It could be someone we don't know. Hey, between you and me, I think Ira has what it takes to accomplish the impossible."

"You really think -"

"Yeah. You got a point. Ira could never pull it off."

He propped both hands against his waist, leaned backwards, groaned and resumed walking, only towards his desk instead of the front door, "But since you're worried, let me just say that if the Void was on the verge of escaping, you'd be the first to know."

"Really?"

"You have my word."

The hope in his youngest student's heart was a relieving change of pace from her previous doom and gloom. Eventually, they must assume their roles. The Keyblade War will eventually come to pass. But for now, Ava was his student. And he was her master. So, with the matter settled until she told the others and they demanded answers, he sat back down, stretched his shoulders and restarted the conversation from scratch.

"Oh! I nearly forget. How goes things with your Union? Being in charge of so many young and eager hearts can't be easy."

Last edited: Dec 8, 2019

Chapter 16.3

"So many worlds have been lost."

The discouraging panorama of a world lost to darkness was the reason why he'd gone through so much trouble tracking down Gilgamesh. Including promising the guy something he'd wanted more than anything in the universe. Which involving pulling more than a few strings with Regent Cid. The stakes were high. And the price of failure unfathomable. And getting into the realm of darkness had required doing a few things he normally wouldn't have imagined.

"And now they're trapped here in the darkness."

His ears twitched against the abnormal breeze whispering on phantom currents. Every breath filled his lungs with the putrid stench. Every beat of his increasingly uneasy heart served to reinforce the necessity of his decision. If something wasn't done... if they didn't find the key and close the door... nobody knew how many worlds would vanish. Hundreds. Perhaps thousands. It was something he didn't want to think about.

"If the Heartless aren't stopped, every last trace of light will be extinguished."

Yet seeing *this* world painfully reopened wounds barely afforded the opportunity to heal.

"Such devastation."

Incorporeal shadows clung to the funereal cavern infesting tropical flora. Darkness reached into the false sunlight, attempting to pull her back into the fold. Out of the corners of her eyes, on the periphery of real and imaginary, purplish-black miasma so much like vitriolic oil whispered sounds lacking meaning. There was no warmth or anything resembling peace in the light beating upon their necks. It

felt as if something was mocking them. And she understood why. This was another world long since lost to darkness.

Another world devoured by the Heartless because of her weakness.

"Huh?"

A spark ignited inside her battered and worn-down consciousness. Her head snapped upwards, eyes widening at the landscape, twisted and corrupted by shadows. The pitter-patter of sand underneath mithril-plated boots hastened. Each impact arrived faster and faster. Her heart fluttered. And as she spun around, hand pressed against her heart, her voice nearly cracked, "This is... I've been here before."

"What?"

The unexpected revelation immediately tore Mickey's attention away from the beauty and wonder lost to the darkness, "You know this place, Aqua?"

"A long time ago, when I was looking for Terra and Ven, I came across a small world brimming with light."

She could still remember the sun vanishing below the horizon, deepening oranges and reds and yellows transforming into beautiful shades of majestic purples. On that cusp of night overtaking daylight, waves breaking against her feet and insects buzzing above the ebbing waters, everything had seemed, for a single imperceptible moment, peaceful. As if nothing terrible lurked in the shadows. She must've stood on that beach for hours, staring at the sun until nothing remained but fading embers crackling along the distant darkness. Memories of halcyon evenings laying on the grass next to Ven and Terra after training, too exhausted to do anything other than gaze at the stars, had inundated her thoughts.

One final peaceful reprieve before everything she'd known... everyone she loved... shattered into millions of pieces impossible to put back together.

"And on that world, I met two boys running along the beach."

Pain latched onto her heart. Guilt manifested in the emptiness seeping through her stomach. But no matter how far she walked into the darkness, she held onto those memories and refused to surrender. Not to despair. Not to hopelessness. She couldn't give up. She *refused* to do so, "They were so much like Ven and Terra. The 'bestest of best friends' in the whole world. And even though it went against the edicts, for a moment, I actually considered passing the Keyblade onto one of them."

Her expression subtly tightened underneath clashing memories.

"But someone had already chosen one of the boys. Inside one of their hearts dwelled the potential for wielding the power. So, in the end, I decided against it."

"Two boys?"

Mickey's ears twitched, "Do you remember their names?"

"Their names?"

The darkness was immeasurably cruel. Her physical body might not have aged since she'd surrendered herself to the shadows to give Terra a fighting chance against Xehanort. Neither did her weary heart require sleep or food. But ten years of accumulated memories dissolved the past into faded images and broken sounds. She could no longer remember the colors of the poster above Terra's bed. Nor could she remember the taste of sea salt ice cream. But some memories lingered. Some memories remained no matter how much time might've passed.

"I think... they were Sora and Riku."

Ominous silence enveloped the decimated islands, "You know them?"

"Well, uh, not exactly. I never met them myself."

Experience granted perspective and maturity. By learning from one's mistakes, it was possible to achieve almost anything. Yet in response to Aqua's question, earnest and passionate in a way which tugged at his heart, Mickey found himself back in Master Yen Sid's tower, pouring every books and tomes in search of something to relieve the sense of powerlessness following Ardyn Izunia's unexpected resurgence on Lindblum. A battle which nearly cost his, Ryuko and Gilgamesh's lives at the hands of an unrepentant monster.

"It's just..."

He couldn't be everywhere at once. It was impossible. Magically and physically. Not even Master Yen Sid and Lulu could be in two places at once. Magic had limitations. Even magical clones were nothing more than temporary avatars dispersed upon the slightest loss of concentration. The Keyblade was no different. He'd saved more worlds than he could remember from the darkness. On more than one occasion, exhausted and on the verge of passing out, he'd fought through endless hordes of horrific Heartless number in the tens of thousands to reach a besieged keyhole.

Most of the time he'd been successful.

But it was the times he *hadn't* managed to reach the keyhole which incessantly weighed upon his heart.

"... these islands held a very special place in Ryuko's heart."

That's why he forced himself to memorize the tragic landscape stretching before them.

He needed to remember what he was fighting for.

What they were all fighting for.

"Maybe it's because they remind her of her own world. I don't know. There's a lot of stuff I'll probably never know about Ryuko."

Standing upon the edge of the cliff, jagged purple rocks jutting upwards inches from his shoes at random angles, a cold sun hanging lazily above their heads, his frown deepened into resignation before turning towards Aqua, "But I *do* know one thing - Ryuko really cared about this world. And she would've done anything to protect it."

"She would, wouldn't she?"

First on Thebes.

Then Radiant Garden.

And finally, these islands.

In the aftermath of Burmecia and Gizamaluke's Grotto, alongside the appearance of the Unversed and until reaching Radiant Garden, it seemed like she and Terra and Ven had always been one step behind Ryuko.

"It's funny..."

Fleeting laughter bubbled within her throat as she stared beyond the illusionary horizon enveloping the world of fragmented innocence and lost wonder, lips curling into a semblance of a smile, "After I arrived, Sora and Riku asked if I had an amazing sword' like Ryuko. Their eagerness was infectious. I didn't know what to do. And in the end, I showed them a couple harmless spells. You should've seen their smiles, Mickey. They gave me hope of saving Terra and stopping the Unversed before any other worlds fell into darkness."

The desolate remnants of the once tranquil world shifted underneath a faint wind. Yet nothing moved. Not a single leaf on the palm and paopu trees dotting the fragmented landscape rustled. And as a thought came to mind, forming within the darkest corners of her

heart, goosebumps radiated down her arms, forcing Aqua to fold them underneath her bosom.

"Do you think they escaped?"

"I'm certain of it!"

He didn't have any proof. And maybe he'd never personally spoken to Sora or Riku. Or visited these islands even when Ryuko asked him to take a day off. Maybe he should've. But in his heart, Mickey knew the boys escaped. It wasn't a hunch. Or a guess. His heart simply *knew* they survived. And that was good enough for him, "That's why if we're gonna stop more worlds from falling into darkness, we need to find that key and close the door!"

Mickey's enthusiasm was contagious.

She couldn't deny it.

And he was right.

"Alright."

A somber smile pulled her lips into a soft smile as the darkness, ever-present and ephemeral, momentarily retreated, "Where do we go now?"

"Not far. We're actually really close."

The confidence in his answer took Aqua off-guard, "Huh?"

"It's... well... kinda hard to explain."

Mickey's ears drooped as the nightmare of how much research he'd conducted before tracking down Gilgamesh reared its ugly head. Hours upon hours of reading thick books in the dead of night. Pouring over every scrap of information for clues. Exploring the Lindblum Royal Archives. It had taken months. More than a year, in fact. But in the end, his hard work considerably paid off, "Well, to cut

straight to the point, not just anybody can find the key. To locate a key of darkness, you need an opposing key - one not of darkness, but of light."

As Star Seeker manifested alongside a soft caress of gold and white light, he pointed it skyward, furrowed his brows and searched deep inside his heart.

It was deeper than an impression. But far less than a sensation. Yet it remained impossible to explain with words. What he felt was something entirely different. It was like captaining a ship on the open ocean in the middle of a raging maelstrom at the dead of night. He could barely see beyond the bow. Steering too far to the right or left would take him wildly off-course. And keeping steady would accomplish nothing but crash his ship against the rocks. But in the distance, looming above the darkness while growing closer the longer he braved the tumultuous seas, was a beacon of light.

"Which got me thinking."

The blade of heavenly stars and crescent moons shimmered as he searched the landscape for clues and hints, "I might not know the way, but maybe the Keyblade does. That's how I know we're close. Really close. But there's sorta a big problem."

"What?"

"Well, I never expected Ryuko to follow me into this place."

Two keys were required to close the door and stop darkness from leaking out into the worlds. The key of darkness was one of them. And he'd presumed Ryuko's Keyblade would act as the other. One key of darkness. And another of light. Equal and opposite.

"And since it's impossible to close the door with only one key, we're gonna need a Plan B."

It took him less a minute to come up with one.

"Why don't you do it, Aqua?"

He announced his decision so quickly - so on the spur of the moment - that Aqua's mind lagging behind her heart, "Huh? What?"

"Once we find the key and locate the door to darkness, Gilgamesh can take you back to the realm of light! With your Keyblade, we can close the door and stop darkness from leaking into the worlds."

"But... what about you?"

"Oh, gosh! You don't need to worry about me!"

Mickey waved his hand, brushing aside Aqua's concern with a disarming smile, "I'll be fine! Besides, once the door's sealed shut, Gilgamesh can come back for Ryuko and me."

"I don't know."

There was so much on Aqua's mind that she didn't know what to believe, "But if you think that'll work, count me in."

"Of course, it'll work!"

A modicum of confusion whispered into Mickey's heart. Not because the plan wouldn't work. Not at all. It had to do with something else. Something a little... frustrating. Or completely straightforward. But he was a mouse of his word, "I know this wasn't part of our deal, Gilgamesh, but if you help Aqua, I'll talk with Regent Cid about returning another one of -"

But as he turned around, prepared to keep his promise, Mickey blinked.

There was nobody behind them.

"Where did he go?"

MEANWHILE....

"Where did they go?"

Much like 'heirloom' or 'decorative mantelpiece' or 'belongs in a museum,' the phrase 'lost' didn't exist within his extensive vernacular. Lost? He never got *lost*. The bewildering word disgusted him. He was exactly where he needed to be. It was like Ryuko and her master always said - let your heart be your guiding key. Or something equally cheesy. Which, for the moment and despite no gaps in his perfect, some might say eidetic, memory, was someplace rather unexpected.

"How flummoxing."

The word of the day, or maybe week considering how long he'd been traversing the abyss, might have made him sound smarter, but words and phrases didn't resolve the bewildering situation. In fact, it made everything worse. He wasn't *trapped*. Or entombed. Or imprisoned. Or any number of equally legitimate synonyms. All he needed was one stomp of his foot and this annoying sojourn would be a hitchhiker in the rearview mirror. Granted, there would be immeasurable repercussions for making such a hasty decision. And he would probably not survive such a life-changing choice.

But it was an option.

"Hmm..."

And so, standing in the shallows between ocean and sand, ominous cavern looming at his back and palm trees to his left and right, Gilgamesh reluctantly accepted the truth slapping him in the face.

He was *lost*.

"I must've taking a wrong turn."

Folding two pairs of arms over his chest, mouth pursed into a frown and waves relentlessly crashing against the shore, soaking his greaves in salty brine, he thought backwards. There had to be

something he'd missed. A vital piece of evidence overlooked along the way. But there was nothing. He remembered walking alongside Mickey and the blue haired Keyblade wielder with a chip on her shoulder. Aqua, if her righteous indignation meant anything. Why did someone name their kid after a color? He'd never understand fads. Fist bumping and secret handshakes? What was wrong with a good, old-fashioned hello?

It was almost as embarrassing as parents naming their children after esoteric concepts and phrases.

"But how?"

A grumble built in the back of his throat like dozens of small rocks caught in a tumbler, eventually culminating in a resigned huff.

"And when?"

There had been some Heartless. Not enough to pose any problem. But enough for him to stand back and allow Mickey and Aqua to strut their stuff. He'd helped, of course, but since slaying the vile creatures with ordinary blades in the realm of darkness caused them to immediately reform, his assistance had been minimal. The mouse also mentioned a guy called Terra, who could've been Aqua's long-lost boyfriend from her expression and heavy heart. Or husband. Or maybe brother? He hadn't been paying attention. Not after that ginormous explosion rippled through the realm, rousing both Keyblade wielders into an understandable panic.

However, as a swordsman, keeping his cool when it came to seismic activity caused by overwhelming power was child's play.

But anything capable of effortlessly shaking a realm of infinite darkness with a single attack deserved to be granted the widest of berths.

"Humph! This bizarrchitecture makes no sense! I don't know if I'm facing north or south!"

His options were limited - either turn around and head back into the caverns or stand around on the beach. Two terrible choices. And the purplish-blue spikes clawing their way out of the ground like so fingers only a few feet to his right were a little too disturbing for his eyes.

"Hmm... could this be an illusion?"

Was he happy? No. And it was all Ryuko's fault. Yet with no other recourse, another grumble built within his throat, interrupted only by waves crashing against his ankles. The scenery might have been pleasant. But a relaxing tropical island just wasn't him. He preferred trekking through off-beaten worlds and long-abandoned fortresses and castles to lounging upon some boring beach, doing nothing all day but sipping fruity beverages and getting sand in awkward places. Where was the fun in that?

"Or my inner demons manifested into existence by the darkness to torment my conflicted heart?"

The latter question gave him food for thought.

"Maybe I should backtrack and... hold on a second."

It wasn't on the beach.

Or the nearest island.

Or the rocks sticking out of the ocean just the wrong shade of purplish-blue to be disturbing, foamy water breaking against their razor-sharp surfaces.

Upon an outlying, distant and much larger island of the tropical archipelago than the diminutive beach his misguided sense of direction apparently led him to, yet not quite far enough for his chocobo-like eyes to overlook, someone was lying face-down in the sand. He couldn't see their face. Or what they were wearing. Or even if they were alive. But he *did* recognize their hair.

"Is that... Ryuko?"

He leaned forward, hand raised to his forehead and armor creaking.

"It IS Ryuko!"

Only she wasn't moving.

"... is she dead?"

Rhetorical as the question might have been, it nevertheless ground his train of thought to a screeching halt. Ryuko? Dead? Bah! She was tougher than nails! Nothing could take Ryuko down for the count without massive collateral damage. Not to mention she was his sworn rival! The adversary he'd eventually defeat in a climactic one-on-one battle. Blade clashing against blade! Skill against skill! If she somehow perished to a random Heartless in the middle of this annoying realm of darkness and shadows, he'd donate his collection to that rusty knight with the Gysahl pickle addiction.

"Oh, she IS alive!"

A sigh exploded from his heart when Ryuko flopped onto her back.

"Well, that's one problem out of the way."

This was tremendous news! Well, not tremendous. More like good news. Or terrible news. Because, as to be expected given the cruel mistress that was fate and her proclivity towards choosing the worst possibly outcome, the exact moment he and Ryuko were once more reunited, Mickey and Aqua were nowhere to be found.

"What to do... what to do... what to do..."

His painted lips were pursed into an introspective glower. His scarf fluttered in the ocean wind kicking soft whirls of sand into the air. Yet he had nothing to show for his efforts, which only worsened his already gloomy mood. What was he going to do? Did he go over to Ryuko and say hello? Did he pretend he'd been searching for her

this entire time? Did he ignore her silent cries for assistance and march back into the caverns in search of Mickey and Aqua?

No, the latter was out of the question.

Time might not exist in the realm of darkness, but death certainly did.

"Well, I suppose I should -"

A monstrously overwhelming darkness slapped his heart out of nowhere.

" - let Ryuko deal with the Heartless."

Storm clouds devoured pristine tropical skies. Lightning crackled with increasing frequency and ferocity. The seas roiled and writhed, turning an even darker shade of purple. The sun dimmed. And despite thankfully being far outside the approaching path of destruction, he shivered. Not from the cold, but long-forgotten memories. Until the day he died, and then some time afterwards, he'd recognize that horrible darkness heading straight towards Ryuko at breakneck speeds. It was impossible for anyone, himself included, to forget something so horrific.

It was why he turned around and prepared to strategically retreat into the ominous caverns.

[And yet he didn't.](#)

"What am I doing?"

He didn't know *why* he wasn't chancing the darkness. Even with her inhuman strength and peculiar vernacular, Ryuko stood little chance against the approaching Heartless. He wasn't familiar with Keyblade wielders, but based on Ryuko's performance against Maleficent, it would take several additional masters equal to herself, and then quadruple that number for good measure, to match the enormous monster whose mere presence contorted the environment. Fighting

such a beast was foolish! Suicidal! Something Ryuko would undoubtedly do without a second thought!

"No! No! No! What is she thinking!?"

This was a disaster!

If Ryuko kicked the bucket this deep inside the realm of darkness, he'd never have the chance to wield her scissor swords! They'd be lost to the shadows, forgotten to anyone without knowledge of their existence. More importantly, Satsuki and Beatrix wouldn't be too happy he'd stood aside and watched Ryuko perish fighting against something more than capable of rending worlds with a single attack. Against such opposition, victory would be nothing more than a fading dream.

"Humph!"

Painted brows furrowed in deep consternation.

The way he saw it, there were two terrible choices standing before him. If he escaped into the darkness, there was a good chance he'd survive. But Ryuko would die. And the legendary scissor swords would be lost to the shadows alongside his mortal existence when Satsuki, Beatrix or a handful of other people discovered what transpired. But if he assisted Ryuko in her foolish stand against a force of nature, he would most certainly perish.

Yet if they somehow survived and escaped back into the light, she'd owe him a massive favor.

"Ugh, I'm going to regret this."

In a burst of physical prowess and self-proclaimed talent, Gilgamesh launched himself straight into the awaiting maelstrom, reluctant participation carried upon the howling winds biting at his cheeks.

"RRRRYYYYYUUUUKKKKOOO!!!!"

Last edited: Dec 15, 2019

Chapter 16.4

Here's a special holiday update. There's not much to say. Well, not much I can say without spoiling anything. But there's plot. So, enjoy and keep reading!

[img: <https://external-preview.redd.it/PoBos2Y0GiMm6EJoWhHL2xot4om9gzkYcXp9YCXCsDc.jpg?width=1024&auto=webp&s=445d8204937fbf139c646611652bb8d06733d286>]

"RRRRYYYYYUUUUKKKKOOO!!!!"

That voice.

She knew that voice.

As Gilgamesh's annoying shout rose in pitch and volume until it overwhelmed the torrential downpour without quite reaching ear-deafening screeching, her bloodied lips curled into something between a half-cocked smirk and overconfident grin.

"Heh..."

It felt like electricity was pumping through her veins. Bolstered by his unexpected appearance at the last possible moment, Threadcutter spun around her fingers, sending streams of water splashing through the rain. Her bare feet sank into the sand as the darkness, even for a moment, retreated to the periphery of her heart, overwhelmed by the crimson brilliance dancing around her Keyblade's teeth. Everything felt different. Not better. Just different. And she knew why. He might be a freaking pain-in-the-ass. And complained about everything that didn't benefit him in one way or another.

Plus, that backstabbing bullshit he pulled on her and Satsuki back on Arendelle.

"Gotta say..."

But nobody deserved losing their heart to darkness.

Not even an annoying asshole like Gilgamesh.

"... for once, I'm happy to see his sorry -"

Nothing lasted forever. You had to enjoy life to the fullest, never wasting a moment. Because one day you might wake up and realize everything changed. Those were Satsuki's exact words whenever her sister decided to get 'philosophical' on her ass. Which was normally twice a month. Three times if Mako did something strange and unexpected. But with one of her eyebrows twitching - she didn't know which one - she tracked Gilgamesh's rapid descent through the rain. She watched, forced to observe every second, his boots simultaneously punch the sand down the beach.

A perfect landing ruined by his foot catching against a half-buried rock.

"AAAAEEEEIIIIEEEE!!!!"

And just like that, her respect for the guy dropped straight to rock bottom.

"Oh my god..."

As she watched the six-armed disappointment tumble head-first into the shallows, her eyes rolled themselves out of sheer embarrassment. If most of her right arm wasn't scattered to the furthest reaches of the realm of darkness, she'd probably flip Gilgamesh the bird. Or furiously pinch the bridge of her nose at his unrelenting stupidity before punching his ugly face.

"What a freaking dumbass..."

The odds Gilgamesh could hear her annoyance was around fifty-fifty. Thanks to that awkward tumble, his head was buried in the sand.

And the rest of his body disappearing beneath crashing waves every time the tide rolled up the beach. But she couldn't care less. A soft hiss bubbled between her lips. Her toes sunk into the soaked sand, squishing against saltwater and seaweed smelling faintly of mildew.

"HEY!"

A peal of thunder similar to that horrible storm so many years ago stabbed deeply into her heart.

"DUMBASS!!!"

But her voice was louder than goddamn weather.

"IF YOU'RE DONE ACTING LIKE AN ASSHOLE..."

Somewhere in the background, behind shattered trees and dreams, something broke. A piece of the world disintegrated in the wake of the arriving Heartless. And as Gilgamesh finally extracted himself from the tidal shallows, brushing sand, shells and seaweed off his face, she blew a strand of matted hair off her nose. And again. And then again. And a fourth time before angrily stabbing Threadcutter between her feet, reaching up, pushing everything backwards and yanking her Keyblade out of the ground in the same smooth motion, "WHERE THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN!?"

"Geez, there's no reason to yell at me, Ryuko"

Aware of the approaching calamity radiating unfathomable waves of darkness yet realizing there was nothing he nor Ryuko could do about it, Gilgamesh peeled a peculiar starfish off the Genji Armor before casually flicking it back into the chaotic ocean, "I was lost. Same as you, I suppose. No more. No less."

"LOST!?"

The conniving bastard's *bored* tone threw her off her game.

"WHAT THE HELL DOES... alright. Fine. You were lost."

She could accept that.

"Bullshit!"

No! Not a chance! No way could she accept such a bullshit, half-assed random excuse. Gilgamesh *never* got lost. The bastard bragged about having a built-in navigation system capable of pinpointing his location anywhere in the worlds. An annoying boast he'd repeated time and time again, "Since when did YOU get lost!?"

"Since... uh... yesterday. Or today. Or however long we've been wandering the darkness."

A snort forced itself between clenched teeth.

"Huh, you know, between you and me, I'm glad you brought that up."

With a flick of her wrist and thrumming of her beating heart, she propelled an exceptional amount of magic into Threadcutter, immolating her Keyblade within white-hot flames. One clench. Her magic was eager to burn Gilgamesh's ass. Barking over the steam rising from her Keyblade, Ryuko expressed her irritation with the bastard in the most viscerally pure way available - physical threats, "Because I *haven't* forgotten you leaving me to fight the Heartless by my goddamn self!"

"Aw, come on! There were thousands of them!"

The self-proclaimed greatest swordsman in the realms, light and dark, gestured enthusiastically. At Ryuko. At the monster relentlessly bearing down on them. And needing to illustrate what should have been blatantly obvious, "Maybe millions! And I don't have a Keyblade, remember? Besides, you were having so much fun slicing and dicing the Heartless. I couldn't recognize half of your techniques. They were so... so... so... powerful! And dramatic! And a little too bright for my eyes. Of course, despite your protests to the contrary, I didn't retreat like a coward. On the contrary, Ryuko, if you had run

into any sort of trouble, I was more than prepared to intercede on your behalf and... uh... I..."

A reddish-orange eldritch light burning with immeasurable darkness caught his attention.

"Uh, what happened to your arm, Ryuko?"

"It's fine."

"But... your arm's missing."

"I *said* it's fine!"

Vitriolic shadows forced their way into her lungs alongside the unforgettable smell of sea salt and brine as she twisted Threadcutter several degrees counterclockwise and tightened her grip, "Now drop the subject before I burn your freaking ass!"

"Uh, are you sure you're alright?"

Of course, Gilgamesh didn't take her advice. Why had she expected something different from a guy who didn't know the definition of 'stealing' and 'lost?'

"What the hell did I just say!?"

Losing an arm sucked ass. Not knowing when her Life Fibers would get their act together sucked a lot more ass. Her arm should've come back. It shouldn't take this long for her body to heal. Yet she was still down an arm. Something she tried not thinking about. Which didn't work. Because the more she tried focusing on the present, the more she tried *not* thinking about going through the rest of her life without an arm, the more she remembered about Nui Harime's reaction to getting both of her arms sliced and diced by the Scissor Blades.

All that psychotic happiness shifting into panic as she stomped those floppy limbs underneath her heels was something she'd never quite

forget.

But the Cloud of Darkness didn't have Scissor Blades.

So why the hell weren't her Life Fibers working?

"For the love of god, get over it, will ya!?"

A quick jerk of her head, lower lip sucked into her mouth and teeth slightly bared dispelled the depressing thoughts, "If you don't, I'm gonna shove Threadcutter down -"

She stopped mid-rant.

Her eyes slowly drifted downwards before snapping back to Gilgamesh.

SMASH!!!

And with fury coursing through her veins, granting a level of strength far surpassing mere adrenaline and magic, she threw her entire weight sideways and smashed her foot straight into the six-armed pervert's crotch.

CRUNCH!!!

"Ouch! Shit! Crap!"

Pain quickly shot up her leg. She felt something break. Something *important* break. Not a bone. Or a muscle. Hobbling away from the perverted son of a bitch, Threadcutter clattering to the ground, Ryuko experienced her pride shattering into thousands of pieces as she rubbed her badly aching foot, "God damn pervert! What the hell is your armor made of!?"

"Humph!"

An insulted scoff ricocheted against the calamitous winds, "You have some nerve insinuating such a heinous thing!"

The situation was implausible, unbelievable and quite frankly preposterous. For whatever reason, perhaps as the result of some strange technique or clingy Heartless, her clothes lay tattered, leaving very little to the imagination. There was nowhere he could look without getting an eyeful of toned muscles and flawless skin confessing a regimen of beauty products impossible to replicate. But to think Ryuko would immediately postulate something so disgusting and abhorrent. Pervert? Him? Nonsense! Such sickening behavior was anathema to everything he stood for as a swordsman and weapons aficionado.

"I'm insulted!"

On the other hand, he really couldn't blame Ryuko's reflexive outburst.

"I don't even know why we're friends if you don't trust me!"

Of course, there were men and perhaps a handful of women who might be swayed by Ryuko's unexpected and embarrassing wardrobe malfunction.

But not him.

"After everything we've been through, you should know I respect your personal boundaries more than anyone!"

It took considerable effort not to wince. And to keep his voice from raising several octaves. Yet with considerable willpower, he accomplished the impossible. Which brought to light something peculiar. Usually whenever Ryuko kicked him, he was down for the count. Her physical prowess went beyond supernatural. He had theories and ideas. But nothing concrete or worth risking someone - most like Satsuki or Beatrix if the latter was visiting Ryuko - attempting to confiscate most or all of his collection. But this time, instead of pulling his head out of the sand and complaining about her short temper and immaturity, he stood unflinching while Ryuko rubbed her bruised and swollen foot.

"Hmm..."

Which immediately garnered his undivided attention, "I'll accept your apology later, Ryuko, but... um... is something wrong? You're not healing as quickly as usual. And your kick lacked its normal oomph."

"Nothing's wrong."

A brush of venomous darkness masked the slight tensing of her shoulders as she stopped rubbing her ankle, which still hurt like a bitch, "I'm fine."

His concern was touching. Hell, in a way, she preferred Gilgamesh acting relatively normal instead of bragging about weapons he stole from some unsuspecting world or demanding she wager one of the Scissor Blades in some stupid dual. It was nonsense. It was bullshit. It was - a throbbing pain in her ankle stopped her thoughts mind-rant. Shit! Why the goddamn hell did her foot hurt so freaking much?

"By the way..."

But pain or not, they had more important things to worry about. Like the Heartless clawing its way through the darkness. With a grimace plastered across her face, she wove emerald magic into her ankle, reducing the swelling and bruise until nothing remained but bad memories, "Before shit starts getting real, how'd you track me down?"

"Well, um, to be honest, I wasn't looking for you."

Although shooting the breeze with Ryuko warmed his heart, there was a time and place for everything. And standing upon the precipice of battle against what could only be described as the physical manifestation of darkness and despair without weapons nor blades? Now that was downright foolish.

He felt naked.

Far more naked and exposed than Ryuko.

"It was complete coincidence that our paths once more crossed!"

Stomping one boot into the eroding sand through which rainwater snaked towards the ocean in far too many rivulets and streams for his eyes to track, he sought access to his special dimension. An interdimensional closet nobody, not even obnoxious practitioners of mystic arts like Merlin and Yen Sid and that other sorcerer, could break into. A complicated runic sigil spun into existence beneath his feet, hand-drawn symbols floating above the sand. North. South. East. West. The cardinal directions glowed with individual colors. He twisted his right ankle fifteen degrees. Curled his toes inside his boots.

And in response to such an obtuse password, four legendary blades exploded out of the manifested magic alongside an ear-splitting *shing*.

Tournesol. Galatyn. Lightbringer.

And finally, Zantetsuken.

"If not for my keen eyesight and your unique hairstyle, I'd never have spotted you lying in the sand."

Four hands curled around four handles of varying size, shape and curvature, "Without further reason to get sand in my boots, I would most likely have resumed searching for Mickey and Aqua, cautious of any minor perturbances in the ambient -"

"HOLD ON!!!"

The world ground to a screeching halt. Her heart. Her mind. Her entire goddamn body. Everything felt numb, "Aqua's here!?"

"... yeah?"

He said it so matter-of-factly, as if it was the simplest thing in the universe and she was the one acting like an idiot. Swamped by darkness and rain colder than ice, her mind attempted processing the truth. If it was the truth and not some bullshit lie. In her hand, knuckles blanched alabaster by conflicting emotions, Threadcutter trembled. Her heart beat more than a mile a minute. She found it hard to think. To breath. To do anything. But that didn't stop her from getting into Gilgamesh's surprised face.

Gilgamesh wasn't a liar. No. Scratch that. He wasn't a *good* liar. He *a/ways* lied about stupid shit. Like his swords. And where he 'discovered' those swords.

But not this.

He wasn't lying about meeting Aqua.

"Where are they!?"

The Cloud of Darkness was closer. Much closer. Her heart thrummed. Darkness and light mixed together within her soul. Yet snapping towards Gilgamesh, water dripping from visibly matted hair and blood trickling down the corners of her mouth, she demoted the powerful Heartless to second place on the 'list of important shit,' "Why aren't they with you!?"

"I'm not sure."

"Don't start that bullshit again!"

"Why would I lie about meeting some keyslinger I've never met before?"

Gilgamesh's eyes narrowed to slightly glowing pinpricks. Underneath the crimson scarf wrapped around the lower half of his face, tattered and frayed from exposure to darkness and battle, he grimaced. An imperceptible yet noticeable admittance of frustration. Not quite

anger. Yet not quite complacency, "Furthermore, even I was being mendacious, ask yourself how I would know her name?"

She blinked.

"Alright, maybe you're not lying."

Admitting anything to Gilgamesh sucked. But if he wasn't lying about Aqua, she *had* to know the truth, no matter how bad it might hurt, "But I gotta know about Aqua! How's she -"

Pain.

Intense, excruciating agony.

It smashed against her heart with enough force that she nearly threw up.

"RYUKO!!!"

Gilgamesh spoke. But she didn't hear the guy. She didn't even know when Threadcutter fell from her fingers. One moment, she was holding her Keyblade. And the next, blinded by pain and deafened to the roaring wind grinding against her heart, she collapsed onto her knees, fingers gripping her elbow with the crushing force of a steel vice. Her entire body felt like it was dunked in molten mithril. Everything *hurt*. The pain surpassed anything. She couldn't think. She couldn't move. She couldn't breathe without feeling like the slightest motion would tear her body into dozens of pieces.

Spittle flew between lips gasping for relief which simply didn't exist.

The unbearable pain lasted no longer than three successive heartbeats.

Yet it felt like an eternity.

"S-SHIT!!!"

She didn't see anything happen.

She *felt* everything happening.

For one brief moment, she was aware of every Life Fiber in her body.

Beneath white-knuckled fingers gripping flesh hard enough to leave fading bruises, threads radiating an eldritch burning darkness stitched new flesh, muscles and bone into existence out of nothingness. Inch by inch, starting with her elbow and ending with fingers clenching handfuls of sand in search of relief, her Life Fibers defied every known law of physics. Mako once said matter couldn't be created or destroyed. And Merlin explained during one of his interesting lectures that magic couldn't restore severed limbs.

And yet her old arm was back, right down to the callouses on the knuckles and palm.

"Hah... hah... hah..."

Life Fibers were bullshit.

"Shit! That... goddamn!"

With a dollop of spittle clinging to the underside of her chin, she gasped, spitting out a mouthful of rain, "Some warning... would've... been... freaking... wonderful!"

"Huh..."

The swordsman slash pain-in-the-goddamn-ass scratched the back of his neck with one of his two empty hands, "... well, what do you know, it seems you were worried over nothing."

"Oh, give it a rest."

Ryuko ran her tongue against the inside of her mouth before spitting a glob of blood into the sand, "I ain't in the mood for your nonsense."

"Nonsense!?"

Another individual might have been mortified. Or perhaps horrified into somber reflection upon one's mortality in an increasingly dangerous universe. But not him. Instead of flinching out of terror, he rolled his eyes and voiced his concerns heedless of whatever dangerous thoughts lurked within Ryuko's mind, "That's some serious anger. Has your self-esteem fallen so low as to lash out at your friends?"

"Self-esteem?"

Her voice momentarily cracked. Self-esteem? *Self-esteem?* Threadcutter trembled under the weight of her fury as something inside her heart snapped, "My self-esteem's fine!"

"Then why were you acting so serious?"

"BECAUSE I WAS MISSING MY GODDAMN ARM!!!"

As the rain pouring upon their heads dropped another ten degrees, teetering between water and ice, Gilgamesh's painted brows furrowed, "One arm or two does not an exceptional warrior make. Your own master lacks an arm and yet she remains a fearsome beast unrivaled by anyone. Even I dare not challenge Beatrix without at least assurance of retreat."

"Are you done?"

She wasn't angry at Gilgamesh.

Not at all.

But once the Cloud of Darkness was dead and the door to darkness locked good and tight, she was going to kick his freaking ass halfway across Alexandria.

"Because if you're finished..."

A stomp of her foot against Threadcutter sent the Keyblade spiraling into her fingers, "... I've got a Heartless to take down!"

"Humph! You keyslingers have no sense of self-preservation!"

Conflicting thoughts coursed through Gilgamesh's mind. Ideas and concepts, some good and others terrible, came and went. Thunder rent the heavens asunder. Lightning illuminated the shattered world lost to darkness. Papou and pain trees swayed in the roaring wind. And he, standing in the pouring rain while holding four legendary weapons of great power and renown, spoke his mind.

"Don't get me wrong, Ryuko! I'm always willing to test my skills! Staining my blades with the blood of worthy foes is one of life's greatest pleasures!"

For emphasis, and to prove the point Ryuko was specifically overlooking, he brandished the varied assorted of greatswords, longswords and normally two-handed claymores towards the darkness manifesting upon the horizon, "But even I, the great Gilgamesh, dare not provoke such a horrid beast!"

"I'm not asking you to!"

"Then why am I here?"

"Why are you - oh, for the love of..."

Her voice broke. Not from the weight of everything happening at once. Or facing down a powerful Heartless two threads away from invincible. Or knowing Aqua had been wandering inside the darkness. No. It was Gilgamesh's bitching and moaning and self-centered narcissism that pushed her over the edge, shattering her patience and unleashing every ounce of anger seething within her heart, "I ain't gonna make you fight something you don't wanna fight! If you're that worried, go hide in a cave or something."

"You didn't hear a word I said, did you?"

Gilgamesh countered Ryuko's righteous indignation with a withering glare of equal or greater intensity. Granted, he appreciated her heartfelt gratitude towards his safety. It took an enormous heart to prioritize one's friends over themselves. Self-preservation wasn't exactly something easily overridden, especially when faced with a monster beyond anything yet experienced in the realms of light, dark and those dwelling between.

"Of course, I could retreat at a moment's notice! In fact, I've addressed my reluctance quite clearly!"

As only person he considered his equal, Ryuko deserved nothing less but the unvarnished truth. She was his sworn rival. Wherever his words might lead, they would not contain even an ounce of falsehood, "I'd rather be anywhere else! Exploring worlds. Embarking upon grand adventures! Heck, even listening to Mickey's tedious tale about some antediluvian boat sounds interesting compared to what's coming! Yet here I am, standing at your side, prepared to do just that, and all you can do is *complain!*"

"Complain!? Like hell I'm - "

She stopped mid-rant.

"Ugh..."

Then proceeded to roll her eyes, stare at the ground and mentally imagine punching Gilgamesh in the face.

"Let's cut the shit! You don't have a Keyblade. I do. All those fancy stolen - "

"HEY!!!"

" - *stolen* swords are useless against the Heartless. Especially in a place like this. Where I'm gonna guess they're less than shit, right?"

"Uh... hmm..."

If he'd deigned to unleash Kikuichimonji upon the darkness, the legendary naginata appropriated from the Da-chao Temple would probably be resting on his shoulder. But no matter how cruel they sounded, Ryuko's words rung true. The Heartless were annoying enough on the worlds. But a good swipe or slash usually dispersed them. Yet in this horrid place, one swing might destroy them. But like a bad itch, they'd come right back, as strong as ever and quite eager to devour his heart, "I admit my repertoire lacks the means of slaying creatures of darkness."

The tension between their respective levels of inhuman stubbornness electrified the atmosphere.

"Yet from your attire, or lack thereof, you've already crossed blades with the monster. And lost, have you not?"

Out-arming Ryuko six to two might seem an advantage. But he knew better. When push came to shove, Ryuko was surprisingly capable of moving fast enough to multiply her available limbs three-fold. Maybe four-fold on a good day. And judging by her twitching eyebrow, she was at wit's end. Yet he *had* to speak. They were friends. And friends spoke the truth no matter what happened, "If the Keyblade proved ineffective against a Heartless once, what makes you think trying again would prove different?"

"Because..."

She could have shouted.

Her voice would have easily overpowered the storm.

But as the word dragged itself out of her mouth, forced into existence through sheer willpower, Ryuko bit the inside of her cheek, "... because there's no running away."

Rainwater dripped down her matted and bloodied hair. She had Gilgamesh's complete and undivided attention. For once in his stupid life, the bastard kept his mouth firmly shut. Any other time she'd be

ecstatic. Or suspicious. Yet instead of feeling angry or frustrated with the bastard, unease wormed its way into her heart. One by one, her fingers tightened around Threadcutter. Nui Harime. Ragyo Kiryuin. Ardyn. Xehanort. Vanitas. Maleficent. She'd fought each and every one of them without batting an eye. Without worrying about whether or not they might kill her. The Cloud of Darkness should've been no different. It *wasn't* stronger than Ardyn. It didn't match Ragyo's insane strength when they fought above their world.

Yet something about the Heartless unnerved her heart.

"You can get away. But not me."

A bead of rain dripped from her nose, landing on her chin before falling upon her tattered jeans, "This thing's latched onto my heart. It knows my light... and darkness. That's why, no matter what I do or where I go... even if you get me out of this goddamn hellhole... It won't stop coming. It ain't ever gonna stop."

Word by word, sentence by sentence, anger crept into her voice.

"That's why I **HAVE** to take it down, here and now! Because if I don't, everyone's gonna be hurt! Mickey! Aqua! Satsuki! Mako! They're all counting on me!"

Her presence overwhelmed everything. For a moment, the storm seemed to retreat, quieting to a dull roar. The rain lessened into a drizzle. The roaring wind whispering into both of their hearts faded. And with lips bared into an enraged snarl, Ryuko swung Threadcutter towards the waves crashing onto the beach, vermillion light interspaced with stars of twinkling gold dancing between its quilted teeth, "You might be scared. But not me! It looks bad! But I've faced worse odds and come out on top! Even if it kills me, I'll figure out a way to take this Heartless down!"

Lightning crackled.

Part of the islands surrounding Besaid Island vanished into the darkness lurking beneath the waves.

And brushing aside the morbid premonition clinging to his heart like indigestion, Gilgamesh scratched his chin, "Self-sacrifice? Bah, I knew you keyslingers were crazy, but who would willingly sacrifice themselves? There's no point in such a futile gesture!

"I don't see you coming up with anything!"

She didn't snap. Not yet. She knew what Gilgamesh meant. She knew what the bastard implied. But if they weren't staring down the Cloud of Darkness, she would have already driven her Keyblade straight into his crotch. Then followed with a beatdown or burning his pompous and arrogant ass with magic. But he was her ticket out of this stupid place. Which meant biting her tongue, putting on a calm façade and limiting her frustration to the sporadic twitching of her eyebrow, "And running away doesn't count!"

"Retreating is a perfectly legitimate strategy!"

Water lapped around Gilgamesh's ankles as he brushed aside her consternation with straight-to-the-point, no-nonsense criticism.

"Besides, what can I do against such a beast? Talk it to death? Convince it to turn over a new leaf and become a receptionist at the Lindblum coliseum? I think not!"

His voice momentarily cracked. A minor weakness concealed by the storm raging around them. There were no other options. None that he could think of. But concealing his depression underneath bluster and mockery, he turned aside, legendary blades held in a welcoming gesture at the Heartless growing closer by the second, "You're not acting rationally!"

"What?"

"Let's face it, your physical prowess far surpasses your master's," he was never good with speeches. But as the surrounding islands collapsed into the ocean, rock and coral emerging in its place, he found himself on a roll, "Yet she figured out a way to drive this horrendous beast back into the darkness without resorting to panic-driven tactics!"

"I know that!"

The wind howled, driving the cold deep into her body, "You don't think Beatrix told me everything that -"

It struck like lightning.

An idea.

A brilliant, insane, balls-to-the-wall dangerous idea.

"Alright, shut up and listen!"

Vermilion danced between Threadcutter's teeth as the Keyblade, burning with endless light and possibility and energy, spun through the pouring rain, keychain silently jingling against her wrist, "I've got a plan to take this thing down! And best of all, it doesn't involve you doing anything!"

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"You're not just saying that because you care about me, are you?"

"Oh, for the love of - shut up and get out of here before I shove Threadcutter up your goddamn ass!"

Ryuko wanted to hurt the bastard. Knuckles or Keyblade or Scissor Blades. And she didn't care how. Anything and everything would be fine, "You're the only one who can get Mickey and Aqua out of this

dump! That's why you can't fight this thing! If it's too strong for me, they'll be trapped in this stupid place with no way out!"

"Huh, can't believe I forget about something so simple."

An awkward pause followed her affirmation towards his safety before he shook his head, "Yet I must still refuse!"

"WHY!?"

"The answer should be obvious!"

Gilgamesh heard Ryuko's disbelief. He could *feel* her frustration and impotent fury upon each seething word. She had legitimate reason to concern herself over his safety. As a master of the legendary Keyblade, infamous hero of Lindblum and self-proclaimed guardian of light, it was her duty to ensure darkness remained contained. But this? A silent chortle echoed through his heart as the Genji Armor, moderately damaged through constant battle, glistened in the pouring rain.

"If I followed your instructions, my reputation would be destroyed beyond recognition!"

Water dripped from Galatyn and Lightbringer, illuminating the former's crystalline construction and the latter's mystical origins, as both blades settled between his fingers, "You might label me as a hero. And perhaps such an honor would be deserved. But nobody else would know. If I escaped this wretched dimension without you at my side, they'll call me a coward who sacrificed one of the greatest Keyblade Masters the realm of light has ever known to save his own traitorous skin. Innocent or not, my reputation would be that of a traitor. One well-deserved."

Another peal of thunder shook the heavens.

"That is why I, the great Gilgamesh, shall not abandon you!"

Her heart felt heavier than orichalcum.

Matted hair caked with sand, blood and rain laid flat against her face. A ponytail long unraveled through battle clung to the back of her neck. Drop by drop, mixing with grim, darkness trickled down her chin. Even though she could move, Ryuko realized she couldn't. Something held her back. A thought. A single, disheartening thought wracking her mind to the point she couldn't think about anything else.

"Senketsu."

"Huh? Sen... what?"

One by one, her knuckles tightened around Threadcutter. It still hurt saying Senketsu's name. It brought back memories, good and bad. Fighting alongside him. Taking down everyone as the perfect team. Him complaining about her BMI and fatty foods. Her going to the ends of the earth to collect Senketsu's pieces from Satsuki's stupid multi-school raid trip. Every memory reminded her of better days, "If I don't make it back... if anyone blames you... tell Satsuki - Senketsu. She'll understand what that means."

"Uh... erm... Senketsu, was it?"

Gilgamesh didn't know how to respond to such a strange request.

"I appreciate the effort, Ryuko, but I'm still not leaving!"

"What!?"

"Like it or not, Ryuko, we're friends!"

He shouldn't have laughed. Perhaps the worsening situation was affecting his judgment. And yet he chortled, an almost mocking sound insulting everything in the vicinity. Sure, he'd undoubtedly frustrated Ryuko beyond hope. If past was prologue, she was likely making a mental note to punch him across the face once they

escaped the darkness. But all that was necessary, "You might keep me at arm's length, but I cherish our friendship! We've been through much. You've saved my life. And I've saved yours. To listen to such a heartfelt request would be spitting upon our friendship. That is why I shan't retreat as commanded!"

"Tch! Do whatever you want!"

Despite wanting to punch the bastard's face, a smirk graced Ryuko's lips, "But since you're sticking around, I recommend stepping back. Things are about to get crazy."

For the first time in forever, Gilgamesh listened to her instructions.

But she'd already stopped paying attention to him.

"Haaaaaa...."

As the tide arrived with the coming storm, water lapped against her ankles. Every wave crested higher and higher until the entire beach was submerged. Darkness whistled alongside screaming shadows. She was drenched to the bone. Her body shivered in the cold. Yet nothing bothered her. Not the wind. Not the hurricane. Not the powerful Heartless nearly upon their doorstep. Nothing at all. As a soft, imperceptible sigh passed through her lips, she focused on one thing and one thing only. She focused on the rhythmic beating. Counted each and every pulse until they merged into a comforting melody.

"Haaaaaaa...."

Everything faded into the background.

Her breathing steadied.

Threadcutter dissipated into gold and vermillion light.

"Haaaaaaa...."

There was nothing to see. Nothing to hear.

As the Cloud of Darkness finally broke through pitch-black clouds concealing its physical presence, emerald flesh scarred by an appreciable gash on its right arm, glowing yellow eyes focused exclusively on her heart, she closed her eyes. She drowned out the noise. She ignored Gilgamesh's heart from across the island where he'd decided to retreat until something happened. Breathing deeply, holding the air inside her lungs before exhaling just as softly, she reached outwards, fingers splayed in the rain, before crossing both arms in front of her body.

Chapter 16.5

I could have added several more points of view to this chapter. But that would have only added unnecessary filler.

THUMP-THUMP

"Haaaaaaaaaa..."

She didn't think it would be possible. It should've been improbable. Or maybe super impossible. But laying spread eagle on the uncomfortable bed tucked in the corner of her dreary cell, staring lazily at the different cracks on the ceiling going about their lives and jobs without a care in the world, Mako wondered if someone could die of boredom. But the worlds were full of unusual things. Maybe she *could* die of boredom. But she didn't want to do that. While being a ghost and flying through walls sounded like lots of fun, Ira would be really upset.

And Ryuko would be seven times as upset.

"Boy, being a prisoner sure is boring."

Not to mention attending her own funeral might be considered socially awkward.

"Isn't that right, mister ceiling crack?"

The ceiling crack's unmistakable silence spoke volumes.

"I know. That's what I thought you'd say."

Sliding her feet up the bed, she hugged both knees firmly against her chest. She stared at her scraped kneecaps, counting each and every cut. And with a childish pout someone might confuse with anger, puffed her cheeks into something resembling an overinflated balloon and began rolling back and forth. Aw, she was super-duper bored! Really bored! More bored than the time she and Ryuko saw that

confusing play with the singing mice and rats. But no matter how many times she tried distracting herself, even apologizing to the ceiling crack for hanging up in the middle of their conversation, Mako found herself thinking about the same question as always.

"What would Ryuko do?"

She could see it now.

If Ryuko were here, smiling in the way that makes her heart flutter, she'd give some sort of speech. A rousing speech with lots of fancy words and promises about demonstrating the amazing power of friendship. And then boom! Pow! Zap! She'd punch through the nearest wall with her fist, march straight to Maleficent and her secret cub and give the mean witch a good talking-to with the Keyblade. Or blast her in the face with magic! Or cut off her awesome robe with the Scissor Blades.

"Haaaaaaaaa..."

Stopping mid-roll, which happened to leave her facing the wall opposite the magical bars impervious to stern words, an audible sigh echoed through the nearly empty prison, "I really wish this room had windows so I could -"

A familiar feeling tickled her heart out of nowhere.

"Huh?"

And like a bullet fired out of a fancy cannon, Mako shot out of bed, "Ryuko!?"

THUMP-THUMP

The Bahamut soared through the incomprehensible darkness upon wings of emerald light. Her hands gripped its controls with delicate strength, shoulders barely acknowledging the powerful forces seeking to tear apart the gummi ship.

"Ryuko..."

It was impossible to adequately describe the emotions striking at her heart. One could spend an eternity attempting to do so, listing words and phrases, crafting poetry of indescribable beauty. Yet such nonsense would fall short of the truth. The bond she shared with Ryuko... an unbreakable chain weaving everything they've experienced into a tapestry of memories and emotions... was stronger than any blade.

"... you truly are exceedingly reckless."

Such comment needed no further elaboration.

Ryuko was a rose struggling against a hurricane. A flower planted in an unkempt garden, ignored by the one who gave it life and meaning. One would assume its petals no more than seconds from scattering to the furthest corners of the world. Casual observers, those lacking forethought and intelligence, would see the rose for what it represented - an ephemeral beauty. A delicate masterpiece to be cherished with gentle fingers yet just as easily forgotten. A *thing* considered precious for what its existence characterized and nothing more.

The corners of her mouth twisted at such absurdity.

Minutes passed.

Although it felt much longer.

Silence reined throughout the Bahamut as its engines, prototypes constructed by Regent Cid himself, kicked into overdrive, sending the gummi ship soaring around a planetoid several times larger than Alexandria Castle without so much as a change in gravity.

Emerald contrails glistening in the dark void, twirling and dancing around one another until merging into a single vibrant stream.

"... ki? Sa...?"

An excessive burst of static, undoubtedly due to the Bahamut's exceptional distance from the normal shipping routes, shrieked through the cockpit.

"... he... me?"

Her eyebrows furrowed.

"Satsuki? Can you hear me?"

At the familiar voice, the tension within her heart plummeted. The vermilion star brighter than the entire heavens, hovering in front of the Bahamut like a beacon in the darkness, no longer drew her undivided attention. It was Inumuta. But her former associate sounded panicked. No. He wasn't panicked. But *something* was wrong. Emotion clung to the normally stoic programmer's voice. For one who prided themselves upon keeping calm even in the face of threats far beyond human imagination, which contained pretty much every problem plaguing the worlds, to call without taking the time nor effort to compose themselves?

She couldn't think of anything which could cause such uncharacteristic behavior.

"Inumuta."

The silence filling the Bahamut reached deafening proportions as she pressed the button above the central display, "You have something?"

"Satsuki, I've found her!"

He dashed through the streets of Lindblum, heedful of the pedestrians and guards capable of easily sending his laptop crashing to the ground with a single impact. His shoes slapped against cobblestone tiles. An unbuttoned white lab coat over a teal

sweater that desperately needed washing, collar tucked underneath his chin, leaving his mouth exposed, confessed his exhaustion.

"I've found Mankanshoku!"

THUMP-THUMP

"Gawrsh, would ya look at that?"

Out of sheer curiosity, Goofy stuck his finger into the upwards-flowing sheet of water. It felt like poking gelatin. Or meringue. Heedless of Donald's annoyance, he poked the waterfall again and again and again, each time creating a small burst of bluish-green magic, "Hey, Donald, I didn't know waterfalls worked backwards."

"They don't."

"Then what do ya call this?"

"I don't know! Now stop asking ridiculous questions and let me think!"

And think Donald did. For an entire minute. Arms folded over one another and brow furrowed together, the court wizard thought long and hard about their predicament. He wracked his brain for solutions to their problem. But nothing came to mind. Which only made him angrier! And he knew exactly what to blame - Monstro. If that stupid whale hadn't spat them out halfway across the universe, they could've already landed in Lindblum and left several times over! Everything would be better. But now? Now they were forced to take the awfully long way back.

Which, thanks to Goofy and Sora wanting to visit every world they passed and refusing to take no for an answer, was taking forever!

"Hmm..."

Lost in his own annoyance, he nearly missed Sora's strange silence, "What?"

"Dunno, it's just..."

Sora didn't know what to say. So, instead of saying anything, he folded his arms, frowned and kicked a small pebble off the platform into the water. He should've been excited. Some worlds were fun, like Ariel's and Jack's. Others were, as Ryuko said, more trouble than they were worth, like Monstro. But there was something... off... about the castle looming in front of them. A lot of things. Like the emblem he'd seen on many of the Heartless carved in the middle. Or the enormous Heartless, some of which he'd never seen before, flying through the darkening skies around the castle towers.

He'd need to be an idiot to not think going inside was a really bad idea.

But that didn't explain the weird feeling in his heart.

"... maybe it's me."

Meshing his fingers behind the back of his head, Sora stared at the bright red star twinkling above the castle, "But it just feels like I've been here before."

I thought you said Ryuko never took you anywhere!"

"Well, she didn't."

There was something on his mind. Something that prevented him from answering Donald's question. At least, not right away. Riku. Kairi. What happened? They were supposed to be best friends. They'd known each other for as long as he could remember. Riku was his first friend. They shared secrets and dreams with each other. So, why had Riku acted so different inside Monstro? He'd sounded like Riku. He'd laughed like Riku. And he'd even fought like the Riku he remembered. But he hadn't been the same person. Plus, working with Captain Hook? Kidnapping Wendy? That weird shadow thing that looked just like him?

And what happened to Kairi?

Was her heart really gone?

He didn't know.

He didn't want to think about such horrible questions.

And what was the deal with Riku claiming *he* was the one taking Ryuko's lessons to heart?

"I mean, she was going to. But then, you know..."

He kicked another small pebble it into the water, "Maybe Ryuko talked about this place or something."

"Aw, you're probably just overreacting. Everyone acts like that when they see their first castle."

Donald rolled his eyes before turning to Goofy, who'd taken the chance to walk onto the water surrounding the platform and examine one of the floating bubbles, which immediately teleported him back onto the platform.

"Stop messing around!"

The mage's temper *finally* broke. Not only skyrocketing but breaching the atmosphere with enough velocity to reach the moon. What did Goofy think this was, a vacation? This wasn't the time or place for random shenanigans! Stomping against the ground, electricity flickering around the enchanted wooden staff, he struck the knight captain with a glare worth its weight in magic, "Someone or something dragged our ship here! And I'd bet every munny in my pocket it's whoever's inside that castle!"

"Ya think so?"

Scratching his temple in thought, Goofy took a long gander at the ominous castle, "Hey, ya think if we ask nicely, they'll let us go?"

"I don't know."

Donald didn't know.

And quite frankly, he didn't care.

The sooner they got off this world, the better.

"But there's only one way to find out."

THUMP-THUMP

Framed by lustrous blonde hair falling to the small of her back, naturally flawless lips quirked into a smile far too wide.

"Hmm..."

Ideas whirled through her mind. Thoughts and concepts, some magnificent and others discarded like last year's spring patterns, came and went. And with those thoughts, her friendly smile widened, "Golly, are you *really* going to do something like that?"

It was a such a silly and ridiculous question.

Not because there wasn't an answer.

But because ~everyone~ already knew the answer!

Without the slightest care in the worlds, Nui flicked a finger through the dusty sunlight, catching motes of light and darkness upon a manicured fingernail painted voguish pink. Ryuko might like climbing to the top of Lindblum's Grand Castle to watch airships fly through the cloudy skies. But aesthetics and natural landscapes were never *her* thing. She simply couldn't find any amusement from such boring activities. Not that she'd ever criticize Ryuko's decisions. They were simply two people with completely different hobbies and personal interests.

"Wow! You really ~are~ going to do it!"

Amusement clung to her tongue alongside a giggle.

The words emerged with fashionable slowness, each syllable elongated and emphasized until existence itself couldn't tell if she was being genuinely sincere or purposefully mocking.

So much had changed since moving into the old coot's manor.

Out with the old and in with the new. A personal mantra carrying more weight than nearly anything in the worlds. And for good reason! Gone was the boring pink coat that accentuated her eyes but made her stomach look too large. It hadn't taken long. A few days, in fact, to learn how to properly weave magic and darkness into standard threading to mimic her drab coat's fantastical properties! Revocs and everything Ragyo Kiryuin spent decades building from scratch might be dust in the cosmic wind but she was ~still~ a certified and exceptionally trained couturier far surpassing those stupid moogles with their adorable pom poms.

A ruffled skirt, shades of pink and white and red mixing perfectly together, folded between her knees.

And an unzipped pink and white hooded jacket over a cerulean shirt bearing Elmina's Workshop's infamous logo.

The perfect ensemble for an up-and-coming young woman.

"How téméraire of you, Ryuko."

Her fingers strummed against the marble white table inconspicuously placed in the middle of the room, "What would your master say if she saw you doing something so reckless?"

She, of course, already knew the answer to such a silly question.

"Well, we both know what you'd say."

The sun never fully set over Twilight Town. Yet even so, the light within the room visibly darkened when another series of powerful

emotions battered her steadily beating heart.

Confidence. Nervousness. Frustration. Worry. Anger.

And fear.

Ryuko's violet passions and sentiments slammed against her heart with subtlety she'd come to expect from her sister. A brief moment passed, imperceptible to the normal eye, where her saccharine personality faltered. Her lips creased into a solemn glower. The light within the eyes so much like Ryuko's dimmed. And then it passed. Her smile returned. A soft giggle echoed against the furthest corners of the white room, bouncing against shadows and darkness. And once the symphony of cacophonous emotions faded into the background alongside so many other memories, Nui folded one leg over the other, delight positively radiating from her heart.

"Boy, oh boy..."

Her pink and white boots, stylish and cute yet possessing a certain maturity lost on some people, slapped against the marble floor.

"... throwing caution to the wind and hoping for the best isn't really much of a plan."

The silver locket shaped like a stylized heart, polished surface bearing slight traces of burns and scarring, dangling from her neck glimmered as she sauntered towards the windows.

"I honestly expected better from you."

Leaning forward, hands clasped fingers over wrist against the small of her back, Nui stared into the autumnal twilight, shades of orange and yellow and red dancing like wildfire across the inhumanly wide smile stretching upon her face, "Then again, accepting reality isn't in our nature, is it?"

A monstrous glint entered her eyes.

"But that's what I love about you Ryuko!"

Purplish-crimson light, tainted by burning darkness beyond description, pulsed underneath her manicured fingers.

"No matter how bad things look, you never give up!"

Above the clock tower looming over Twilight Town's main plaza, a crimson star brighter than the surrounding heavens caught the former Grand Couturier's attention.

"So, go ahead! Do what you do best!"

She placed her hand against the glass, smudging the otherwise crystal-clear surface with the moisture from her breath.

"Reach deep inside your heart..."

Nui's smile stretched beyond the limits of mirth. Darkness bubbled within the depths of her otherwise monstrous existence. In the perpetual sunset, her shadow lengthened, seemingly taking on a life of its own as visceral insanity permeated the room.

"... and don't hold ~anything~ back!"

THUMP-THUMP

Risking everything on a single attack was stupid.

Doing her freaking best to dare a bullshit-as-hell Heartless into unleashing its most powerful attack was even stupider.

But she didn't have a goddamn choice.

The situation was simply too WTF to give a crap about stupidity.

"I GET IT!!!"

Every drop of water in the immediate vicinity simultaneously evaporated into steam when the Cloud of Darkness finally *fired*. Her toes dug into suddenly bone-dry sand. Her feathery hair rustled in wind stronger than anything she could remember experiencing. Her skin burned. Her lips chapped. Every breath felt like she was sucking in liquid fire. But pushing every last distraction aside, she reached deep into her heart. She pushed beyond Threadcutter. She punched through the darkness and light composing her heart.

"I FINALLY GET IT!!!"

Crimson light flickered around her body.

Ruby flames danced across her skin.

And with a resounding boom, darkness inches from turning her into a smear, vermilion radiance exploded from her heart with enough power to scatter the maelstrom.

"NOW I KNOW WHY NOBODY COULD KICK YOUR ASS!!!"

Spittle and blood gushed from her mouth.

It hurt.

Everything hurt.

But she saw the Heartless's attack come to a sudden stop.

It *stopped* because of her light.

And a bloody snarl stretched across her face.

"THAT'S WHY..."

Her hands fought for every goddamn inch as they snapped into position, light and darkness making it nearly impossible to see anything.

"... I'M GONNA SEND YOUR ATTACK RIGHT BACK..."

But she could still *feel* the Heartless's unmistakable presence.

Loud and freaking clear.

"... WITH GODDAMN INTEREST!!!"

She roared.

She screamed at the top of her lungs.

And just like that, her tug-of-war between the Cloud of Darkness pulled a complete one-eighty.

Saishū Mubyōshi!!

[!!!]

Last edited: Dec 30, 2019

Chapter 16.6

How long do you plan on sleeping?

[Huh?](#)

Don't strain yourself.

Relax.

Who's there?

You've been through quite a lot.

Can you remember anything?

That Heartless.

I was... fighting it... I think.

No.

I destroyed it.

Saishū Mubyōshi.

Quite the extraordinary technique.

Yet lacking originality.

I don't recall asking for advice.

How do you feel?

Fighting that Heartless must've been difficult.

Is your Heart alright?

I'm fine.

A little banged up.

But nothing too serious.

Are you certain?

Some wounds aren't so easily noticed.

Yeah, I'm certain.

Ah, so you do remember, after all.

Remember what?

The truth, of course.

And the memories you've buried.

Memories? Truth?

What are you talking about?

It's not a shame to admit weakness.

That Heartless was strong.

Stronger than anything you'd face before.

Are you *sure* you're alright?

I *said* I'm fine!

And stop trying to change the subject!

Changing the subject?

That's quite the accusation.

You're the one who's forgotten the truth.
Go to hell.

That Heartless's destruction is only the beginning.

Victory always comes with a price.

Are you prepared for the consequences?

I guess so.

Whatever happens, happens.

I'm not worried.

Worried?

Why would you be worried?

Perhaps something else is on your mind?

The hell does that mean!?

Well, what are you going to do now?

I don't know.

Hadn't planned on fighting that thing.

So... maybe... yeah...

Gotta help Mickey close the door.

That mischievous king is quite powerful.

Are you sure you can trust him?

What kind of question is that?

The guy's my friend.

I'd trust Mickey with my life.
Your friend, huh?

So, why keep secrets?

Why not tell him the truth?

What are you talking about?

I'm not hiding anything.

Your remarkable strength.

Your transcendent power.

Your heart's overwhelming brilliance.

Surely you weren't planning on keeping such gifts secret.

What if I was?

Life Fibers aren't that special.

Not special?

That's right.

Compared to the Heartless, Life Fibers are basic shit.

They're really dangerous.

But *not* that freaking special.

Oh, is that right?

Then why not tell Mickey?

If they're not special, why hide the truth?

Because it won't matter.

Then why deny yourself?

Surely you don't hate yourself that much.

Hate myself?

Why would I hate myself?

I just don't think Life Fibers are worth the effort.

But you've known Mickey for years.

Surely you can trust *him*.

Maybe you're right.

Mickey's the most honest guy I know.

But I still don't like it.

The *master* who defeated Ardyn Lucis Caelum...

... who destroyed that atrocious Heartless...

... nervous about the truth?

I'm not nervous!

It's just...

Just *what*?

What's the point?

Telling Mickey will only make my life more difficult.

You have serious trust issues.

It has nothing to do with trust.

The worlds have enough problems.

No need to add my issues.

Stubbornness clings to your heart.

Or perhaps it's childishness guiding your thoughts.

Either way, you're only prolonging your suffering.

What's that supposed to mean?

Your light might be strong.

But every light casts a shadow.

And your shadow is exceptionally dark.

Don't remind me.

I've heard it all before.

Have you?

Lying to others is one thing.

But lying to yourself?

I'm not lying.

But you *are*.

I'm not!

Deny all you wish.

But you cannot change who you are.

Or where you came from.

Life Fibers have nothing to do with anything!

Take a deep breath.

Do you remember the truth?

Even if you don't, your Heart surely does.

It doesn't matter *how* I took that bitch down!

It's dead and I'm not.

Everybody's safe.

That's all that matters.

Even now, you deny the truth.

Screw you!

But that's *your* choice.

Do what you feel is right.

What I feel is right!?

Your Heart is strong.

Stronger than most.

But such strength conceals weakness.

You cling to a veneer of humanity.

You allow yourself to be bound by false strings.

But why?

It would be so easy to accept the truth...

The truth ain't always good!

Some things are better left buried.

Who are you to determine that?

Do you think the universe revolves around you?

That's not what I said.

Perhaps you're right.

Who can say?

You'll know soon enough.

Huh?

You've tried your best.

Yet your best simply wasn't good enough.

Shut up.

Your Heart's conflicted.

Yet are these your own emotions...

... or someone else's?

That doesn't make any sense.

Doesn't it?

No, it doesn't.

How disappointing.

You've felt it, haven't you?

Perhaps not consciously.

Another heart beats alongside yours.

One you'll find to be quite familiar.

That's bullshit.

When you meet them, what will you do?

Will you accept the truth?

Or reject your heart's truest essence?

I don't know!

You don't have much time to decide.

The door is nearly open.

If you don't make up your mind before then...

... your friends will perish.

And you'll have nobody to blame but yourself.

Wait a second!

But don't start worrying about stuff like that.

Let your Heart be your guiding key.

And trust your friends.

I'm not finished!

Accept yourself, Ryuko.

Because if you don't, everything will vanish.

Consumed by Nothingness.

Last edited: Jan 5, 2020

Chapter 16.7

It's a little shorter than I'm used to writing, but I've pretty much said everything needed to be said.

"Ugh."

Her ears rang. Her eyes burned. Something disgusting and horrible filled her mouth. And she was fairly certain she was upside-down. Plus, her head hurt. Like a bitch. But with reality reasserting itself, she violently extracted herself from the sand, sucking mouthfuls of air into burning lungs.

"Gah... hah... hah... hah..."

Spittle trickled from the corner of her mouth as she gasped for breath. Her fingers clasped handfuls of wet sand, rain still clumping particles into lumps and clods. Through refocusing eyes and slowing heartbeat, Ryuko tilted forward, pressing her forehead against the sand with the reverence of a parched desert survivor finding water. One by one, starting with her hands and ending with her feet, she tested her fingers and toes. Clenched them. Tested them. And once she was certain nothing was missing, collapsed onto her back, turned around and cursed.

"Shit!"

It felt like she'd been run over by a flock of rampaging red chocobos.

And not in a good way.

"Never doing that again."

As half-lidded eyes slowly blinked, and then blinked again, she noticed something. The storm was gone. The skies had changed. Before the Cloud of Darkness tracked her deeper into the darkness, it had been mid-afternoon. But now it was evening. On the edge of

breaking curfew and getting arrested type of evening. Not to mention the entire sky, stretching from one horizon to the next, bands of colors shifting and changing every time she looked away, resembled the northern lights she'd seen over Arendelle.

It was beautiful.

It was enchanting.

And she absolutely ignored it.

"God damn it!"

Because as the cobwebs finished clearing, allowing her to remember everything, or almost everything, she cupped her face with both hands.

"What the hell was I thinking!?"

A brilliant, insane, balls-to-the-wall dangerous idea? Like hell it was! She was a Keyblade Master, not some rebellious punk drifting from high school to high school, searching for the bitch who killed her dad while robbing gangs for petty cash. Maybe Saishū Mubyōshi worked better than expected. And nothing like the other version she and Senketsu came up with on the fly back home. But if Satsuki found out - or worse, if Beatrix learned about her stupid plan to tank the Cloud of Darkness's strongest attack in order to send it back with interest - they'd confiscate her Keyblade until the last traces of light were extinguished.

Most people would say that was impossible.

But they didn't know Beatrix.

Or Satsuki.

"Uuuugggghhh..."

A groan forced itself between her lips as she collapsed back onto the sand, "At least I won, right?"

Things *seemed* normal.

No storm. No rain. No darkness. No Heartless. Just the sound of crashing waves, ominous silence and her steady heartbeat.

If she didn't know better, she would have thought Saishū Mubyōshi took down the Cloud of Darkness.

Which was hilarious.

And impossible.

Because no way could she pull off something like *that*. She might be strong as hell. Maybe stronger than Beatrix. But going toe-to-toe with the Cloud of Darkness? Pfft! She'd thrown everything but the kitchen sink at the monster. And all that accomplished was burning almost every square inch of her body, leaving her on the verge of passing out from exhaustion for the first time in forever and temporarily losing most of her right arm.

But she was kicking and breathing.

And the Cloud of Darkness was gone.

"Hey, if you're not busy doing anything important, mind filling me in?"

She'd noticed him ages ago. It was impossible *not* spotting the ugly-as-crap fashion disaster he called armor. Dragging her tongue along the inside of her mouth, she once more forced herself off the ground, sand falling from her hair like rain as she stared at Gilgamesh, "Did I beat that thing or what?"

"Bah!"

Standing atop a nearby dune like some sort of stupid bird, three pairs of arms folded across his chest, the infamous swordsman

refused to turn around, "Do you expect me to provide the play-by-play of your boss battle?"

SHINK!!!

"Alright! Alright! Fine!"

She lowered Threadcutter little more than an inch, miniature tongues of red and orange flames vanishing into the darkness, when Gilgamesh threw his hands into the air, "You bested that Heartless! But if you're looking for details, you shan't find them with me! Don't get me wrong, I tried watching your climactic battle! But that enormous explosion of green energy when your light collided with the Heartless's darkness nearly threw me across the realm!"

"Explosion?"

That first part made sense.

But it was the other part of Gilgamesh's ridiculous yet totally sincere answer that threw her mind through a loop, "Green?"

"Green. Blue. Magenta. Octarine."

Quickly shooting through a list of colors, some real and others imaginary, the multiarmed swordsman shrugged dismissively, "The color does not matter. Only that whatever you were planning, foolish and shortsighted it was, seemed to have worked. I couldn't see anything, of course. But after regaining my senses and extracting myself from the displaced sands of this beach, I watched the lower half of Heartless's body falling towards the ocean before exploding into the breathtakingly beautiful and picturesque aurora stretching before us."

"Ugh..."

The world spun around her heart as she collapsed back onto the sand.

"... thank god..."

She closed her eyes. Yet she could still see. She drowned out every unnecessary sound. Yet she could still hear Gilgamesh's stupid voice. As her fingers relaxed, Threadcutter vanishing in a soft shower of vermillion light, Ryuko breathed. For the first time in forever, she could *breathe*.

"It's actually freaking dead..."

And the emotions circulating through her body, causing her fingers and toes to tingle, felt amazing.

"Everybody's safe..."

She smirked. A laugh forced itself through her lips. A chuckle bubbled within her throat. Throwing her arms sideways, clutching handfuls of sand, she held each breath, relishing every gulp of darkness-tainted air. Relief defined every aspect of her existence. For a precious few seconds, she couldn't remember feeling angry or upset or pissed. Not at Gilgamesh. And for good reason. The Cloud of Darkness... the monster that took away her master's arm and nearly killed Merlin... was nothing more than fading wisps of darkness on the celestial wind.

"... they don't gotta worry anymore..."

Relief.

That's what she felt.

Pure, unadulterated *relief*.

"Heh..."

As she stared at the clouds, memorizing their shapes and colors, an errant thought popped into her mind, "Guess even someone like me gets super lucky every now and then."

"What's that mean?"

But all good things must come to an end.

And Gilgamesh unnecessarily interjecting himself where he didn't belong worked *perfectly* to shatter the peace and tranquility.

"None of your business, that's what."

A scoff tore through her throat. But it lacked anger. Or fury. Or annoyance. Or even focus. It was more instinctive than vindictive. Something she had to do if she didn't want Gilgamesh getting ideas about pushing his boundaries. And just as quickly, she closed her eyes and pushed the asshole to the furthest corner of her mind. It was his fault. Her victory... the Cloud of Darkness exploding into fireworks... happened because the annoying bastard decided to compare her 'physical prowess' with Beatrix's. That was why, just this once, she was going to let his comments and questions slide off her shoulders like water.

"... but thanks."

She took another breath, exhaling through her nose as a strand of feather hair tickled her forehead, "I couldn't have taken that thing down without your help."

"Huh? R-Really?"

Her honest and genuine appreciation for his efforts must've taken the criminal slash infamous swordsman off guard, judging by his stuttering, "Well, um, thanks. I guess? Don't know what I did exactly..."

"Just take the freaking compliment!"

And just like that, she was back to square one - tired, exhausted and with more questions than answers.

"Oh, by the way..."

Her feet simultaneously hit the ground. Her toes curled into the sand. Her fingers grasped Threadcutter as the Keyblade, responding to her writhing emotions, manifested in a shimmer of vermillion bright enough to almost be ruby or crimson. Alright. Enough was enough. Since the moment she opened her eyes, Gilgamesh had yet to turn around, look in her direction or explain *why* he was acting so goddamn strange, "WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU!?"

"You're delusional!"

Refusing to turn around, even with a fire coated Keyblade aimed between his shoulders, Gilgamesh shrugged in a way that destroyed whatever feelings of goodwill remained within her heart, "There's nothing wrong with me!"

"Oh yeah?"

Her eyebrow, alongside the entire left side of her face, briefly twitched, "If nothing's wrong, dipshit, why don't you turn around and say that to my face!"

"Humph! Nice try, Ryuko! As if I'd fall for your tricks!"

"Tricks? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Playing stupid won't work on me!"

"God damn it! Start making sense before I shove my Keyblade down your throat!"

"Wait... hold on a minute... you *really* don't know?"

His confusion was palpable. She could almost taste Gilgamesh's bewilderment, which matched her own uncertainty when he began searching through his armor, "I could have sworn you knew..."

THUD!!!

She followed its ascent and descent through the air. Carefully-wrapped, sealed with element-resilient plastic and stamped with Moguet Central's seal - several moogles tinkering and working on a magical crystal - the all-too-familiar black coat, folded and freshly pressed the point she couldn't spot a single wrinkle, flew over Gilgamesh's shoulder. The black parcel stood prominent in the fading sunlight, flipping end over end before landing on the sand in front of her feet.

"But this is a huge relief, you know?"

As her brows knitted together, she opened her mouth to speak.

To say something.

To ask why he was giving her something so strange.

Only for Gilgamesh's *next* comment to drive the air from her lungs.

"Because, uh, well, for a moment, Ryuko, I thought you were an exhibitionist."

Her eyes widened.

The faintest of blushes blossomed across her cheeks.

Against her better wishes, she looked down, ignoring the Scissor Blades dangling from her neck.

And promptly wished the Cloud of Darkness had stolen her heart.

Last edited: Jan 11, 2020

Unknown Report 16

Unknown Report 16

"You seek answers."

"You and I are similar."

"We do not exist. We don't have feelings."

"We cannot feel what others call emotions."

"Do you wish for a purpose?"

"... Roxas..."

"That is right. A new you."

[Roxas.](#)

That was his name.

Wasn't it?

He never noticed the forest give way to streets. He never heard insects and wildlife turn into people talking and laughing and arguing. It was all too much. Everything sounded familiar and old. Everything looked new. Hundreds of faces coalesced into a mishmash of smiles and frowns and other emotions. He wanted to ask questions. He wanted to know answers to things that made no sense.

And yet he couldn't feel anything.

Who was he?

Why couldn't he remember anything?

"I swear, Hayner, it wasn't my fault!"

Darting between pedestrians, nearly losing his balance several times only to recover at the last possible moment, a heavysset teenager ran for his life as another boy gave chase.

"Yes, it was! I saw you drop it! You owe me an ice cream!"

Panting and nearly out of breath from chasing her friends across Twilight Town, a girl with brown hair leaned against a building, hand grasped her chest.

"Come on, Hayner! Can't you go one stinking day without ice cream!?"

When her friends refused to listen, the girl stomped a foot against the ground, "I mean it, Hayner! You keep eating ice cream and you're going to grow as big as Pence!"

"Hey!"

"Hey!"

There was a moment of anger when Pence and Hayner turned on the girl. But then they laughed. The latter forgave the former for dropping his ice cream. And unable to understand the strange emptiness inside his chest, or why he felt nothing at all, he sat down on a bench, watching ants and bugs crawling across the ground.

He counted them.

Ten bugs.

"Well, there they go again."

She appeared out of nowhere.

One moment he was alone, his mind blank and thoughts jumbles of words and sounds he couldn't quite understand. And the next, sitting

down next to him, manicured fingers daintily folded across a ruffled pink skirt going down to her knees, a strange woman addressed the question he hadn't known he'd been thinking.

"I mean, really."

Her pink and white hooded jacket, zipped nearly to the top, looked inhumanly perfect.

Not a single thread out of place.

"There are ~far~ better desserts than ice cream."

As her shoulder-length blonde hair gently rustled in the evening breeze blowing through Twilight Town, something changed. The haze clinging to his mind dissipated. He still couldn't understand who he was or why he existed. Roxas. Was that his name? Did he have another name? Why couldn't he remember anything? But when the woman smiled, mischievousness causing her sapphire eyes, ringed by spoke-like structures, to glimmer in the sunset, he found those depressing thoughts fading into the background.

"Like *Crêpes Suzette*..."

With the ease of breathing, the woman fluently shifted between a language he recognized and one he didn't.

"... or *Berries au Fromage* covered with *vanille* and *miel chaud*..."

One by one, her manicured fingers, pink nail polish shimmering like fire, tapped against her chin, "... or if you're feeling ~really~ adventurous, there's always French Chocolate Mousse served with sliced *citrons*. That's one of my sister's favorite desserts. But me? I simply can't stand *citrons*. They're far too sour for my delicate palate. If you ask me, sprinkling anything sour on something sweet in a recipe for disaster."

"..."

"What about you?"

When the woman turned to him, he caught a glimpse of *something* behind those inviting blue eyes, "What's your favorite dessert?"

"I..."

He could understand what she was asking. He understood the language she spoke. Understood every word. And yet, no matter how hard he struggled, he simply couldn't form sounds into words.

"I... don't..."

Without truly understanding why, he found himself watching the three friends across the commons laugh about something or another.

"I don't... know..."

Something the woman noticed.

"Getting bullied, huh?"

The different was almost imperceptible. A slight shifting of her posture unnoticeable to most people. But as her expression turned somewhat sympathetic, carrying a heaviness nearly too great to describe, the woman's left hand moved. And for a moment, he caught a glimpse of something purple, "Do you want me to talk to them? I can be ~very~ persuasive when it comes to teaching bullies what it means to pick on somebody their own size, you know."

"... no... it's... not..."

He shook his head.

"I don't... know them..."

He shook his head again.

"Oh dear, my bad!"

A vivacious, almost effervescent, giggle escaped the woman's mouth, "There I go jumping to conclusions! *Ma faute!* Only an absolute ~nobody~ wouldn't have noticed the obviousness staring them in the face!"

Pressing a finger against her lower lip, she leaned backwards until her lustrous blonde hair draped over the bench. Those too-wide sapphire eyes stared at the glowing clouds floating through the skies as a sigh, burdened with weight he couldn't understand, escaped the depths of her unreadable heart, "I had the same problem too, you know. Overbearing parents can be such a pain. Always telling you what ~they~ want you to do instead of asking what ~you~ want to do."

"... parents..."

Parents.

Did he have parents?

"But that's no excuse for sitting on this bench by your lonesome self!"

He didn't know what to say. Or even if he could say anything. The woman was... strange. And yet, for some reason, she seemed familiar. It's why he stayed silent. It was why he stared at the ground as a tram car packed with too many people to count passed through the commons. And it was why he didn't say anything when the woman's smile faded into something different, "If you want to make some friends, try joining a Struggle match. I'm sure if you go out and strut your stuff, you'll be making lots of friends before you know it."

"Of course, ~I~ prefer Triple Triad."

A shimmer of purple light twinkling around the woman's fingers.

"It's much more fun!"

And suddenly she was holding a card depicting an anthropomorphic insect and several numbers at the bottom, "I can lend you a few cards. If you're interested, of course. Wanna give it a try? I'm sure you won't regret it."

He didn't say anything.

Maybe it was his missing memories. Or knowing something important was missing. But he didn't know why the woman's happiness felt... off. She looked happy. She seemed genuinely friendly. But it didn't look real. And even if he didn't say anything, she must've noticed. Because when he merely looked at the card in her hand without reaching for it, her head tilted ever-so-slightly backwards, cheeks puffed outwards.

"Not a fan, huh?"

With another flash of purple light, the woman snapped her fingers, vanishing the card back to wherever she kept it.

"Oh well, guess you're more into Tetra Master. But if you ask me, those rules can be ~so~ aggravating."

Another trolley rolled through the commons on greased tracks, well-used bell warning people walking through the streets to move out of its way. But he didn't hear it. He didn't pay attention. With his hands clasped together, vacant eyes counting the various squares on his checkerboard-patterned wristbands, he perked up when laughter reached his ears.

"Haaaahhh... everything was ~so~ much simpler when I was your age."

Undaunted by the seemingly one-sided conversation, the woman leaned onto her hand.

"But I guess that's the cost of growing up."

For the briefest of moments, she sounded disappointed. Her sapphire eyes dulled to darker azure as the strange light bathing her skin faded, "You make friends. You lose friends. You grow apart from those you care about. And suddenly you're alone with nothing but memories. *La vie est drôle*. Life really is amusing, isn't it?"

"Who... who are..."

And suddenly she was smiling, an almost mischievous grin stretching across her face.

"Who am I?"

A certain darkness clung to the woman's voice as she finished his question. But it disappeared before the words left her mouth, leaving him staring into her wide eyes displaying only modest embarrassment, "Gosh, how rude! Here I am, talking and talking to a complete stranger, without properly introducing myself. That's simply embarrassing! A total breakdown of social etiquette. I suppose, well, these days, people call me *Amu*. That's as good a name as any, wouldn't you say?"

He didn't know how to respond.

"... Roxas..."

"Hm?"

"My name... it's Roxas..."

"Roxas, huh?"

Amu seemed on the verge of saying something. Her head tilted slightly to the left. Her smile widened. And then, something caught her attention. Clapping her hands together, fingers interlocking together, she closed her eyes and sighed, "Well, it's been swell, but I've got a lot of things to do. Can't spend all day chatting. My *patron* doesn't like it when I'm gone for too long."

Limbs far too lithe effortlessly pushed Amu onto her feet.

"But if you ever need anything, anything at all, don't hesitate to visit."

One perfectly manicured finger curled around the large knapsack leaning against the bench. Something he hadn't noticed until that moment. And with confidence almost superhuman in origin, lifted it into her shoulder.

"*Au revoir*, Roxas!"

He wanted to say something.

He reached out.

But before he could gather the motivation, Amu was gone, blonde hair gently bobbing as she sauntered into the crowd.

"... oh..."

In the background, somewhere over his shoulder to the right, noxious darkness violently pierced the veil separating space and time.

"Ugh, finally."

Stepping out of the darkness, which snapped back to the realm from whence it came, Axel grumbled. An ounce of annoyance contained within the alleyway. Geeze, for a kid with no memories, not even his original name, Roxas sure knew how to hide. That Sora brat must've been a champion of hide and seek or something. Ever since Xemnas ordered him to visit the brat, he'd searched high and low through the forests. He'd taken the tram back and forth, spending what little munny he took from Xaldin's pocket on drinks along the way. He'd even took a stab at exploring the scarred landscape created in the wake of Ryuko Matoi's legendary battle, something Twilight Town turned into a low-cost tourist trap.

He still remembered the day Demyx came back wearing a shirt with 'I visited the scar' across the front in bold red letters.

Which Larxene promptly burned to ashes.

With lightning.

And then promised to do the same to him if he ever bought anything that obnoxiously ugly.

"Well, no time like the present."

He wasn't a babysitter. He didn't like kids, especially amnesiac nobodies who couldn't remember their own names. But orders were orders. And getting turned into a Dusk stood way at the bottom of his to-do list of things he wanted to happen before dying. Blowing a large sigh through his lips as the last traces of writhing darkness vanished around his feet, leaving him diligently fixing an errant spike of bright crimson hair doing its damn best to be a pain in the ass, he forced out a smile.

Then stopped.

And tried again, getting the expression *just* right.

"Time to get this show on the road."

He counted the steps between the alley and the bench.

"Roxas, right?"

First impressions were everything. They were crucial. Even if he didn't *feel* emotions, he still remembered happiness. And that allowed him to smile, breaking the ice between himself and Roxas as he sat on the edge of the bench, "You're a difficult kid to find, you know that?"

"..."

When the kid - Roxas, he reminded himself - didn't say anything or, hell, acknowledge he had company, his smile faltered.

"Right. Right. Not the talkative type."

Geez, was this kid really the nobody of that Keyblade wielder? They didn't look anything alike. In fact, Roxas looked awfully similar to... nah, that couldn't be right. Roxas was definitely the nobody of that Sora kid. No question. Because if he wasn't Sora's nobody, then Xemnas made a serious mistake. And he couldn't remember the last time their leader so much as took one step in the wrong direction. But the similarities. They looked so similar it was almost frightening. But if Roxas was *his* nobody, he'd be older.

Far older.

"You're looking for answers, right?"

That caused some life to return to Roxas's eyes.

"I know this place, right, where you can see the entire town."

Pushing himself onto his feet, Axel patted Roxas on the shoulder, "If you want answers then all you gotta do is follow me. Interested?"

"Who are..."

"Oh, right!"

All but slapping himself on the forehead, he jabbed his thumb against his chest, a haughty and prideful smirk accompanying the personal gesture, "The name's Axel. Got it memorized?"

Last edited: Jan 13, 2020

Chapter 16.8

"You better not have looked!"

"I didn't!"

"Don't screw with me!"

"You have my word!"

Gilgamesh's refusal *sounded* sincere. She had no reason to think the guy was a pervert. But cursing under her breath in a sequence of deepening hisses and grunts growing increasingly vitriolic, Ryuko shoved her right arm into the proper sleeve.

"... tch... great..."

Her left arm snaked through the other sleeve, nearly catching itself on the elbow.

"... wearing one of these stupid coats. As if this day couldn't get any goddamn more embarrassing."

The hatred she felt towards the mystical piece of clothing was unique. Its properties were legendary. Everyone, and she meant everyone, with half a brain knew how special the coats were. It might have looked like a piece of shit raincoat sold half-price at a garage sale. A shitty hand-me-down stuffed in the attic for years. But the truth was different. The moment she finished shoving both arms into their respective sleeves, zipped up the zipper and counted to three, the rest of the ensemble appeared. Pants. Gloves. Heeled boots with just the slightest lift.

In a handful of seconds, she was fully dressed.

"Ugh!"

Her fingers twitched. The corners of her mouth spasmed. It took everything not to yank off the coat, slice it into thousands of pieces with a Scissor Blade and bury whatever remained in the deepest, darkest hole imaginable.

"Why the hell's it so freaking itchy!?"

More than almost anything in the worlds, including walking through her front door and finding Nui Harime drinking tea with Satsuki and Mako, she hated itchy clothing. The occasional sweater from Mako she could tolerate for a couple of hours. But this? She scratched and scratched. Yet there was no relief no matter how much she rubbed. And that only pissed her off. God damn magical clothes! Magical clothing was bullshit. Leave it to some second-rate tailor to create clothes that conforms to your body and protects your heart from darkness but was itchier than Mako's hand-made sweaters!

"Hey! Dumbass!"

But as much as she wanted to destroy the coat, she had no choice.

Either she put up with the itchiest piece of clothing in the universe or she fought the rest of the way through the realm of darkness completely naked.

"Where did you get this!?"

There was a noticeable pause in Gilgamesh's response time before his wince-inducing voice reached her ears.

"The Mognet Central Winter Catalogue, of course."

With a nimble display of acrobatic prowess unmatched by anyone other than herself, Satsuki, Beatrix, Mako and at least ten other people she could name off the top of her hand, the infamous swordsman vaulted towards the stars. Several hundred pounds of solid muscle, armor, weapons and misplaced confidence leapt into the evening. Knees tucked against his stomach, one pair of arms

hooked around his ankles while the other four moved awkwardly on either side of his curled body, Gilgamesh flipped and spun without the slightest concern through the air.

"It wasn't cheap. Nor easy to purchase with my particular credit issues."

Silhouetted against the multicolored aurora blanketing the evening skies following the Cloud of Darkness's unexpected yet extravagant destruction, he flipped forward one final time before landing several meters down the beach, water and sand exploding around his point of impact.

"I was saving it for an emergency. But I think you need it more than me."

Salty water tainted by the slightest trace of darkness dripped down her twitching face.

"You can thank me now."

One after another, her knuckles cracked.

CRUNCH!

And before Gilgamesh realized how much his 'little taunt' made everything worse, her knuckles barely scraped against his nose, causing him to spin violently sideways before crashing ass-first onto the sand.

"NOT A FREAKING CHANCE!!!"

She preferred not breaking promises. Especially promises made to herself. But like most things in life, you had to go with the flow. And when it came to Gilgamesh, expecting the guy to behave like a normal person instead of an arrogant, annoying and self-righteous pain in the ass one heartbeat from pickpocketing every weapon east of Lindblum was harder than teaching a Heartless how to juggle

chainsaws. In other words, it was goddamn impossible without tons of collateral damage and a migraine the size of the Cloud of Darkness.

Both of which sucked ass.

"Oh, by the way..."

Already focused on the future and not the present or the past, she attempted to fix several bangs of unruly hair. Which failed miserably. Ugh, the guy was being more annoying than usual. She would have loved waiting until everything was settled - like closing the door, saving Aqua and figuring out if they could restore the missing worlds - before decking him in the mouth. Or jaw. Or balls. Anywhere that would have driven the point home. But he had to open his freaking mouth. It was goddamn unbelievable.

"... *thanks* for the clothes."

But even if he deserved getting his face turned inside out, plus years and years of collected interest, watching Gilgamesh struggle, more than one pair of hands grasping his excessively bloodied nose like she shattered cartilage instead of dishing out a standard love tap, felt really wrong.

"Oh... uh..."

One flash of emerald light and Gilgamesh's broken nose pierced itself together.

"Shit, you're really off your game today, aren't you?"

Clenching her fingers, several knuckles cracking from the force behind the gesture, she crouched next to the man only beginning to pick himself off the ground, "Anyway, something's been bugging me. You've wasted a lot of time inside this place, right? Doing... crap, I don't know, whatever shit you usually do. So, I gotta know - you ever see anyone else? Does the name 'Gogo' ring any bells?"

"Uh... Gogo?"

As the swordsman answered her question with another, far stupider question, a bitterly cold breeze brushed against the back of her neck. Her heels dug further into the sand covering the beach. And her nose twitched at the godawful smell forcefully shoving its way into her heart. She didn't know where it was coming from. Or what it was. But something goddamn smelled like warm shit mixed with wet dog and fruit left outside in the middle of summer. During a heatwave. On freaking Agrabah.

"About your height. Dressed in gaudy clothes. Brags about being a mimic, not a blue mage."

Furiously buffeted by the confusion rampaging through the darkness, something matched and possibly exceeded by Gilgamesh's bewilderment, she continued giving more and more details about the self-proclaimed 'master of the simulacrum' before realizing the annoying truth, "... you have no idea who I'm talking about, do you?"

"Not a clue."

Instead of lurching onto his feet and proclaiming vengeance for breaking his nose, albeit accidentally, Gilgamesh crossed his legs, leaned forward and grumbled, "I make an effort not to traverse the darkness any longer than necessary. But... hmm, Gogo, was it? Let's see... there's you and..."

Her feathery hair rustled gently on the wind, navy blue curls illuminated by deep vermilion born of the fibers dwelling within her eldritch flesh and blood, as Gilgamesh mumbled and muttered under his breath.

"... well, just you. Oh, and the mouse. I've never seen nor heard of someone that extravagantly and strangely dressed."

With a firm planting of both boots onto the sand, Gilgamesh effortlessly lurched onto his feet.

And then asked something which drove a stake deep into her heart.

"Are you sure you actually saw this... Gogo?"

The question unnerved her far more than it should have.

No matter how many times she spun the memories inside her head, peering further and further back until she was once more opening her eyes in that grassy field, nothing made any sense. Even now, she couldn't understand what happened. If anything *had* happened. Did she actually meet him? Talk with him? Watch him copy one of her techniques out of freaking nowhere against a Heartless? Had Gogo existed?

Or had the mimic been nothing more than an illusion conjured by the darkness, something created to mess with her heart and memories?

The taste of copper filled her mouth, blood gushing from the healing wound on the inside of her cheek.

"I don't know..."

She snorted between clenched teeth, sentencing the unnerving question to the deepest corner of her mind. If Gogo *had* been an intricate illusion, something created by the darkness to screw with her heart, it explained everything.

How he appeared out of nowhere.

Why he disappeared when the Cloud of Darkness stampeded towards her heart.

And how he *perfectly* mimicked Seiken.

Real blue magic took genius. Real genius. And innate talent. All of which she lacked. But *copying* techniques through sampling random memories? She'd screamed bullshit when Gogo explained his game-breaking abilities like it was the simplest thing in the world. And it

was even more bullshit now that she had a chance to really think about everything he'd said.

If he'd said anything and she hadn't been talking with absolutely nothing but empty space.

"... but there's no point thinkin' about it."

Hanging her head forward, she grumbled out the side of her mouth before propping both hands on her knees and standing back up, "We got more important shit to worry about."

"Like?"

She almost punched Gilgamesh a second time.

"Like finding Mickey and Aqua."

Emphasizing every other syllable might not have driven the point through the bastard's exceptionally thick skull. But it stopped her from punching him in the jaw, potentially wasting more time.

"Now, if you're done asking stupid questions, let's get moving!"

Something in her shoulder popped. The joint. The bones. Maybe a muscle. She didn't know. But working her fingers into the space between her neck and shoulder until she experienced the relieving sensation of something shifting underneath the skin, she spared Gilgamesh a half-hearted, I-really-don't-care-about-your-feelings glare, "The sooner we find Mickey and Aqua, the faster we can close the door and leave this stupid -"

"Ryuko!"

"Ryuko!"

She thought the darkness was messing with her heart and memories.

No goddamn way could they arrive *now*.

It was impossible.

"Humph! Leave it to a Keyblade Master to arrive fashionably late to battle!"

But her disbelief shattered into millions of invisible pieces when Gilgamesh opened his mouth and spewed nonsensical bullshit.

"Gah... huh?"

It took incomprehensible amounts of willpower and self-restraint to maintain her composure as Mickey and Aqua leapt down from the treehouse. Like a deer caught in the approaching headlights of a car, her thoughts ground to a halt. Her heart pounded in her ears. Every last drop of moisture left her mouth. She'd known Mickey had been alive and well, kicking and fighting countless Heartless, somewhere inside this place. A heart like his, full of light and hope for a better future, was impossible to miss. Until running into Gogo - which, now that she knew he was probably an illusion - Mickey's heart had been a beacon in the darkness.

But *he* wasn't the reason she found herself momentarily speechless.

Gilgamesh said Mickey found Aqua.

Yet seeing Aqua with her own eyes after so many years of fruitlessly searching the worlds for any trace of her presence stole the breath from her lungs.

"It's about time you showed up!"

Unaware of the violent storm raging within Ryuko's heart, nor how her eyes snapped towards him, knuckles once more clenching into a fist, Gilgamesh propped a pair of arms on his waist and scoffed, "I was beginning to think you'd never show up for this part of the story, thereby sentencing whatever remained to the terrible waste bin of -"

WOMP!!!

Golden light streamed behind her heeled boot as she pivoted sharply, kicked backwards and smashed it into Gilgamesh's crotch with enough vindication to drive the boasting imbecile to his knees.

"What's wrong with you today?"

Paying little, if any, attention to the disabled swordsman crouched on the sand, one pair of hands cupping his injured pride and another keeping him from falling forward, her mouth twisted into a half-sneer, half-grimace. Geez, what the hell was up with the bastard? He was acting stranger than usual. A lot stranger. She was actually concerned. Did he hit his head on a palm tree or something? Nah, that couldn't be it. His head was too hard for a tree. It had to be a rock. A really big rock with sharp edges.

"You know what, I really don't care."

That wasn't *really* the truth.

But for the moment, Gilgamesh's potentially traumatic brain injury stood at the very bottom of her 'important shit to worry about' list.

Right after she found the source of that awful smell.

"Oh, hey, Mickey. Aqua. Sorry ya had to watch this dipshit embarrass himself."

A certain amount of well-deserved satisfaction clung to her heart. Crap. What did Satsuki call it? Schadenfreude or something equally nonsensical. She didn't know German. Hell, she could barely understand French after ten years of Satsuki drilling the language into her freaking skull. Whatever it was, watching Gilgamesh scrape together what little dignity he still possessed made her feel great.

"That... was... underhanded..."

"Blah! Blah! Blah!"

All but rolling her eyes at Gilgamesh's protests, she stepped around the enormous swordsman, one hand half-heartedly waving at Mickey and Aqua, "Well, gotta say - this is one hell of a surprise. I hope ya didn't have too much trouble finding me."

"Did he deserve that?"

"Probably."

It was Aqua's concern, focused on the multiarmed thief beginning to pull himself off the ground for the second time in so many minutes, which doubled the tension. Hearing her voice after so many years drove the air from her lungs. She could barely think, let alone remember to breathe. But one look at Gilgamesh, who was complaining under his breath about her underhanded techniques and short temper, ruined the otherwise picturesque reunion, "He's been acting really weird. I'm actually kinda worried. Was he this bizarre when you found him?"

"Well, he did spend quite a lot of time talking about something called Anastasia."

After several seconds of careful contemplation and consideration, Mickey begrudgingly healed Gilgamesh's physical *and* mental wounds before answering the question, "But besides that, he was the same old Gilgamesh, right down to demanding I hand over Caliburn as soon as we were finished in this place."

"Huh... maybe he *did* hit his head or something."

"Maybe..."

As he belatedly agreed with Ryuko, genuine relief swelled through Mickey's heart.

There was so much about what happened... so much to unpack and think about... that he didn't know where to start. And the relief knowing Ryuko was alright? Gosh, it was just about overwhelming.

He could barely think straight! He wanted nothing more than to sit down, take a deep breath and sleep for a couple of hours. At first, when they stepped foot into the realm of darkness and drawing the attention of nearly every Heartless, he hadn't been *too* worried. Ryuko was one of the strongest people he knew. And Gilgamesh, despite his rather unorthodox behavior, was an accomplished swordsman.

But then the Cloud of Darkness woke up.

Against something like *that*, strength meant almost nothing. The best they could hope... the best possible outcome for everyone... would be to flee back to the realm of light and hope the Heartless didn't pursue them.

For as long as he could remember, the Heartless's unmistakable presence had clung to the shadows, twisting and corrupting everything the longer it remained awake.

And when it suddenly manifested on the depressing remnants of Sora and Riku's world, seeking out Ryuko's determined light once more, he'd been prepared to help her, even if that meant placing his life on the line.

But then something incredible happened - light exploded from Ryuko's heart.

A brilliance grander than the sun.

One that overwhelmed the Cloud of Darkness through means he couldn't quite understand.

"So... Ryuko..."

He had so many questions. How did she defeat the Heartless? How did she end up on this world with Gilgamesh? Why was she wearing a Black Coat? Why had her light felt so strong yet naturally dark? But drawn towards the aurora clinging to the deepening twilight hanging

over the temporarily peaceful island, he decided to ask the most important question out of them all, "How'd you do it?"

"Huh?"

When she saw where Mickey was looking, her heart nearly skipped a beat.

"Oh... *that*..."

A bead of sweat dripped down the back of her neck. The acrid stench of something dead left outside in the sun for several days was pushed to the side and forgotten as goosebumps trickling down her arms and legs. But she kept her poker face, only wincing slightly out of frame. Shit. She should have expected Mickey would ask about the Cloud of Darkness turning into fireworks. There went her grand plan of hoping the guy would move on and not ask difficult questions.

"Sorry, can't remember."

The forced confession dripped from her heart as she latched onto the first and easiest excuse that came to mind, "Honest to god, I have no idea *what* I pulled out of my ass."

"But you're alright, right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. A little tired but not dead, if that's what you're asking."

She concealed it remarkably well. A lot better than he remembered. But Mickey could tell Ryuko was hiding something. He was her friend, after all. They'd fought side-by-side against the Heartless and those using darkness for their own terrible and horrible plans. After more than ten years as friends, he knew nearly every one of her tells. The sporadic twitching of her left eyebrow. The way she looked down and to the right. Even her tone slightly shifted when there was something she didn't want to say. But he also knew when it was important not to push the issue.

If, or perhaps when, Ryuko wanted to talk about how she took down the Cloud of Darkness, she would.

"Well, that's good enough for me."

And that was fine with him.

"As long as you're alright, it really doesn't matter *how* you destroyed that horrible Heartless."

Nodding in her direction before marching towards the water, he counted the patches of missing stars in the darkening skies. Evidence that even in the realm of darkness, the Heartless were still causing havoc and misery, "Still, whatever it was you did, Aqua and I felt your light. A brilliance so powerful it overpowered the darkness itself. If she were here, I'm certain Master Beatrix would be awfully proud of you."

"Oh... uh... yeah..."

Her hesitation must've been noticeable.

Or not.

Because Mickey didn't say anything.

He didn't need to.

"I didn't fight that thing for props."

Turning away from the mouse, a terse scoff hissed between her clenched teeth, "Look, I ain't gonna lie - beating that thing nearly killed me. It was strong. A hell of a lot stronger than anything I'd fought. Kicking its freaking ass was a fluke. Something I couldn't pull off again if I tried. I don't know how I did it, but it's dead, I'm not, everybody's safe and there's nothing standing between us and that door. In my book, that's good enough."

"You haven't changed at all."

Aqua's smile never quite reached her eyes even as the emotional relief bathed her weary heart, "You're still the same person who'd run head-first into darkness to save her friends."

"What can I say?"

Rolling her eyes while doing her best to fix a strand of rebellious hair tickling her nose, Ryuko ignored the smell clinging to the darkness. "Consistency is one of my better qualities."

"Mickey told me everything."

The reminder of how long she'd been stranded inside the darkness, oblivious to the passage of time and those walking the light, sapped at her happiness. Ten years. Every time she'd forgotten, memories swirling together until she had trouble understanding where one began and another ended, the darkness always found a way to push the painful knowledge to the surface of her heart, "About Satsuki. And Mako. And how you never gave up looking for me. Always believing I was out there somewhere, just waiting to be found."

"I didn't look nearly hard enough."

Caught in the crossroads of memories, regrets and failure, Ryuko bit the inside of her cheek.

"If I knew you were in here, I would've made *him*..."

She jabbed her thumb towards Gilgamesh, "... search this place until he found you."

"Sorry, but I don't do anything free of charge!"

Addressing the matter with such determination and passion that it overwhelmed her vitriolic sarcasm, Gilgamesh's painted brows childishly furrowed, "My services don't come cheap nor with familial discount! Now, gil or munny... or better yet, a legendary halberd or

assegai... is much different. For Excalibur itself I would have jumped into the darkest void!"

"No, you wouldn't!"

"Well, it's the thought that counts, right?"

"You son of a - "

As the warm-hearted reunion devolved into familiar bickering, Mickey shared a bewildered expression with Aqua, neither of them looking at one another. To a lot of people, Ryuko being friends with Gilgamesh made little sense. They had almost nothing in common. She protected people from darkness. She fought the Heartless night and day, preventing them from devouring the hearts of worlds. But Gilgamesh? He didn't like speaking ill of anyone. It was disrespectful. But the guy was a glorified thief. Sure, his heart might sometimes find itself in the right place, but Gilgamesh stole blades from their rightful owners.

"Gilgamesh! Do you have a sec?"

And yet Ryuko never turned him into the proper authorities.

"Hmm?"

The heart was a mysterious and unfathomable thing. It had great power yet could shatter under the slightest breeze. Maybe it was impossible to understand what made two people with nothing in common friends. Some friendships simply worked. After all, no matter how much time passed, despite knowing how far he'd fallen over the years, he still considered Pete his friend.

But joining Maleficent?

He couldn't understand how Pete fell so far.

"I appreciate all you've done. Why, I don't think we could've come this far without your help. But if it's not too much trouble, can ya do

us a small favor?"

"A favor?"

"Yeah."

Haggling with Gilgamesh wasn't easy. Gil and munny were usually off the table. As for rare jewels, gems and precious stones? The guy simply wasn't interested in the stuff. His price always came down to weapons. But instead of the usual bluster, Gilgamesh's expression settled between confusion and awkward silence, "I know we had a deal. And you're probably upset Ryuko dragged you into the realm of darkness. It's just... well... if ya don't mind, once we find the key, could ya bring Aqua and Ryuko back home?"

"Err... I suppose..."

He expected Gilgamesh to counter with an offer. But instead of doubling down and asking for another weapon for his troubles, the guy scratched his chin, "... leaving this place isn't difficult. But I expect you to sweeten the pot, mouse!"

And there it was.

"Great! Perfect! Everybody's happy!"

Thoroughly finished listening to Gilgamesh brag about nonsense and shit that made her want to punch the nearest object, which just so happened to be him, she pushed the bastard's hand off her shoulder. Something about this moment didn't make sense. She should be happy. Or relieved, at the very least. Mickey was alright. And she finally found Aqua, meaning her search across the worlds hadn't been for nothing. But the disgusting smell lingering on the darkness felt stronger, almost like a wet dog rolled in something nasty it found outside and decided to share its discovery with its owner.

"I just got *one* small suggestion..."

It felt wrong. And it felt right. But her feelings didn't matter in the long run as she turned to Aqua, "You're leaving with Gilgamesh. *Now.*"

"No."

"Huh?"

"Maybe it would be better if I left. But I can't. Not yet."

Aqua's mouth opened and closed as her expression settled into firm acceptance, "Not until I see this through. Terra. Ven. I'd never be able to look them in the eyes if I ran away now."

"I don't care!"

Interrupting with the subtlety of a nuclear explosion, she crushed Aqua's protests underneath her boot, "You're leaving even if I have to drag you out of this place myself!"

"But - "

"No buts!"

The years had been generous to her. Maybe not as generous as they were to Mako. Before everything went to shit, she stood a few inches shorter than Aqua. But now? Now she was a little taller, "Look! I *just* demolished something everybody called invincible. I think me and Mickey can handle whatever's waiting in the wings. Besides, you know somebody's gotta be on the other side of the door. I'd do it. But since the asshole only brought one coat and I... uh..."

A blush momentarily blossomed across her cheeks.

"The point is, you're going! I'm staying! End of story! Got it!?"

"I - "

"Ryuko's right, Aqua."

As much as he knew Aqua wanted to stay, Ryuko had a point, "You've been lost in the darkness long enough. Me and Ryuko can handle things from here."

She didn't know what to say. Or if she could say anything. With the sun setting beyond the horizon, dragging what little remained of Sora and Riku's world deeper into the unknowable darkness, Aqua pressed a hand against her heart, counting each and every beat as her eyes drifted towards the incoming tide. To feel so helpless. To have the power to save others yet be unable to save her friends. It was a horrible feeling. One she'd felt so often over the last ten years that happiness and warmth were nothing but distant memories.

"... alright."

Maybe it was the darkness finally wearing down the last barricades of resistance inside her heart. But solemnly nodding, more to reassure herself than anyone else, she faced Ryuko and smiled, "I suppose I can leave everything to you. Just don't do anything too crazy."

"Tch!"

Ryuko rolled her eyes, scoffed, grumbled and then smirked, "No promises."

"Enough idle chit-chat and witty banter!"

Sauntering - that was what Gilgamesh did, nothing in the universe would change her mind - down the beach, the multiarmed pain in the ass's annoyance self-righteousness slashed through the moment like a hot knife through butter, "The longer you waste time sharing memories, the more worlds fall into darkness. And that means less weapons for me to add to my collection!"

"Way to ruin the moment!"

Her hand latched around one of the bastard's wrists before he managed taking a single step out of reach, "Oh, and if you tell ANYONE what I told you about Tsumugu, you're gonna experience a world of pain unlike anything else, got it!?"

A moment passed.

Her eyebrow twitched.

Mickey looked back and forth.

And then Gilgamesh quickly nodded, fear coursing through his moronic heart.

"Right! Right! I shan't reveal anything! You have my word, Ryuko!"

"Hah..."

A breathless sigh escaped Aqua's lips when Gilgamesh stomped his foot against the beach, summoning a swirling vortex of noxious shadows and darkness. This was it. She was going home. But something stopped her from walking into the awaiting darkness. A whisper brushed against her heart. And she knew. She knew *exactly* what to do.

"Ryuko."

With a smile on her lips, hope blossoming in the innermost depths of her heart, she reached into her halter-top, searching for something that no longer belonged to her.

"I think you -"

SHINK!!!

Only for the words to freeze on the tip of her tongue when Ryuko aimed the Scissor Blade between Gilgamesh's eyes.

"WHO THE HELL ARE YOU AND WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH
GILGAMESH!?"

Last edited: Jan 19, 2020

Chapter 17.1

"Ryuko..."

The concept of 'feeling' was beyond him. Anger. Sadness. Regret. Mercy. Emotions were foreign concepts. Words without meanings. Phrases lacking context and representation. For what were emotions other than the heart's response to external and internal stimuli? There were biological components. But remove the heart... remove the cornerstone... and those very same feelings lose significance and meaning. He could remember what it felt like to experience emotions. Memories of his earlier existence formed the basis. Sounds and colors diminished by the relentless march of time flowed through the emptiness inside his chest.

He could recall *hatred*.

He could remember *anger*.

"... what is the source of your strength?"

An absence of inflection in his baritone voice concealed underlying malevolence as he reached forward, fingers grasping shafts of moonlight.

The Cloud of Darkness. The Void. An ancient Heartless of unfathomable power. One that existed long before the worlds were torn asunder by the hearts of mankind. A force of nature considered invincible by those who've stood in its presence. Words could not explain such an eldritch creature. Logic collapsed upon itself upon merely considering how best to speak about the Void. For all his planning and hopes, despite possessing great power and abilities himself, even he dared not draw the Cloud of Darkness's inescapable attention.

Yet through unknown means, Ryuko Matoi achieved the impossible.

"It cannot simply be Life Fibers."

Life Fibers.

He did not presume the parasites were *the* source of Ryuko's incredible power. Versatile and adaptable as Life Fibers were, they were nothing more than pieces of a whole. Reduced aspects of a greater being. Without Ryuko, would Life Fibers possess such strength? Without her heart as guidance... without her willpower to control them... would Life Fibers multiply across the worlds, consuming everything until nothing remained? Or would they fade into nothingness, unable to exist without Ryuko's body, heart and soul? If they were aspects of Ryuko, did destroying Life Fibers cause their rudimentary hearts to return from whence they came?

And if so, did that mean Ryuko was nothing but the sum total of thousands - no, millions - of smaller hearts?

Such strength.

"I've been to see him."

He spoke unto the surrounding nothingness as *they* emerged from the shadows. Their footsteps were light and aimless. However, they were here for a reason. To perhaps discover a meaning behind their existence. Or rather, perhaps they wished to understand why they could not remember their past. Nor their name. There were too many reasons to list. Yet as they stepped forth, passing through the boundaries between light and darkness, his head tilted slightly leftward.

"He looks a lot like you."

A potential friend. A new ally to further his goals. One who walked the path of nonexistence, **"Or perhaps... you look a lot like him... it all depends..."**

"Did he do that?"

It required a moment's contemplation to recognize their intent. Ah, yes. He could understand *why* they would desire explanation. But looking downwards, countless cuts and abrasions covering the double-breasted trench coat protecting his hollow existence from the surrounding darkness, a somber chuckle escaped his lips.

"Not quite."

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/7/72/A_Connecting_Dream_13_KHII.png/800px-A_Connecting_Dream_13_KHII.png]

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 17 - Tell It to My Heart

"Not bad."

As the feigned pain clinging to his movements abruptly ceased, an untroubled flourish of his arm dissipated the crackling energy planted in his chest.

"Perhaps this will be enjoyable after all."

Mocking amusement echoed within his words as the youngest wielder of the Keyblade struggled to remain standing. As the final traces of nothingness faded into the darkness, leaving him little worse for wear, Sora gasped for breath. Sweat ran down the youth's face. Tired arms trembled. Exhausted shoulders rose and fell while his companions put on brave facades to conceal underlying fatigue.

It was... disappointing.

Even if fighting alongside others and never by himself, Sora survived Maleficent and his other half, both of whom possessed sufficient power to kill him. The otherwise indistinct and average teenager defeated several of the deceased sorceress's henchmen with barely any training and only the basic grasp of magic. With the Keyblade's

extraordinary power within his possessing, Sora stood against Exdeath. Time and time again, across the worlds, Sora encountered powerful adversaries... beings capable of extinguishing his heart and light... only to emerge victorious.

He'd come to the shattered remnants of his old home to witness that peculiar strength.

Yet despite wielding a Keyblade, there was nothing 'special' about Sora.

"But not yet."

Absolutely nothing.

"Compared to *her*, you wander without purpose. A light flickering in the darkness, ignorant of the greater truth."

"Huh? What?"

Somber amusement was the only logical response to such an incredulous question, **"Why ask questions when you already know the answers?"**

"Grr... what are you talking about?"

Once again, Sora displayed the foolishness of depending upon one's heart. Emotions and feelings guided the young Keyblade wielder's childish response, not logic. Without bothering to consider any possible consequences, Keyblade in hand and physical exhaustion thrown to the wayside, Sora rushed across the decimated chapel, intent on disproving his criticisms with physical violence. Not a terrible strategy. Perhaps, given time and experience and training, such a tactic might've worked. But as he currently stood, incomplete in both body and heart, the young wielder of the Keyblade was nothing more than a child playing pretend.

He could have reciprocated Sora's attack without so much as lifting a finger.

But instead of wasting effort on something which would have produced unnecessary consequences in the future, both near and far, he phased through the enraged teenager, letting the deceptively simple weapon slice harmless through the empty space he'd been standing moments prior.

"It is beyond your comprehension -"

His footsteps carried a measured cadence. Each snap of his heel against the dusty floor reverberated in the upper rafters, "**- for now.**"

As more of Sora's leaking memories shifted between his fingers like water, chains connecting them not only to each other, but those created from his sacrifice, he stopped. With one boot lightly coming to a rest against the very spot the Black Mage and Satsuki Kiryuin struck the finishing blow upon Maleficent six days prior, he turned around, looking over his right shoulder at the perplexed youth.

"Until we meet again."

"Wait!"

Unable to call upon his exhausted comrades for assistance, something achieved through targeted elimination to minimize potential interference, Sora's voice cracked as he struggled to remain standing, "Who are you!?"

"Who am I?"

How much could he say?

How much did he wish to say?

"I am -"

Light filtered through his increasingly transparent form, " - **but a mere** - "

Clack! Clack! Clack! Clack!

The rhythmic snap-clack of heeled boots against weathered masonry and stonework immediately caught his attention. He interrupted himself mid-sentence at the subtle yet familiar rustling of clothing as their owner sprinted through the castle, each menacing stride drawing them closer. Light as powerful as the midday sun shone like a lustrous diamond. Swaying black hair reaching nearly the small of her back framed focused eyes and clenched teeth as she dashed between Sora's companions with a single purposeful step. Her arrival announced powerful gusts of wind and magic.

Yet he focused not on her dramatic entry but the unmistakable click of a katana leaving its scabbard.

An ethereal blade, stained crimson as the blood flowing through his veins, snapped into existence with a resoundingly sharp hiss.

One step brought him closer to her.

Another step and he stood within range.

He was taller than she was. It was a distinct and noticeable advantage. Without hesitation nor deliberation, knowing full well what could happen given her heritage, he stomped both feet against the ground. He pivoted sharply, twisting his upper body around the pitch-black katana aiming to take his head. His eyes, hidden within the shadows of his hood, observed a phantasmal blade extending from her weapon.

"Humph."

Drawing himself closer to the woman, one elbow locked and the other reaching towards her over-extended arm, momentum carried him forward. Nothingness and darkness worked in tandem, dancing

and writhing around one another until his nonexistence shimmered with unholy power. Brushing against the passionate wind accompanying the woman's powerful strike, time lurched to a halt as he swung towards her neck.

Clang!

"What's wrong?"

As the metallic ringing of her weapon clashing against his blade echoed across the chapel, reverberating in the very shadows before fading away into nonexistent, the woman's furious gaze intensified. The cold emotion, controlled and tamed through rigorous training and self-control, matched his own stoic apathy. They were two beings reliant not upon unnecessary emotion but logic and intellectual reasoning.

Yet her voice...

"Am I wasting your time?"

Why did it surface memories he did not remember?

"Hardly."

The woman locked her elbows, preventing him from steadily overwhelming her through sheer attrition and raw physical strength. She did not budge. Not so much as an inch. Her left foot slipped backwards. Yet before she could adjust herself, he pushed forward. Relentlessly. Lashing out wildly, swinging haphazardly through the darkness, he forced the woman to focus on defense. He gave no openings. Nor did he provide any means of safe retreat. But it wasn't enough. Not that he expected to actually hit her with such meager and underhanded tactics.

So why was he the one slowly yet steadily moving backwards?

"Humph..."

A jaunt into the darkness broke the stalemate.

"... did you think that would work?"

He'd known what she'd intended to do.

Her tactics were obvious.

The very moment he reappeared on the shattered remnants of the world he once called home, he pivoted, parrying the pitch-black katana carving through the air towards his exposed neck. An ear-deafening screech of metal against darkness shattered whatever remained of the stained-glass windows surrounding the chapel. As shards of razor-sharp glass showered downwards, bathing them within a multicolored shadow of death and destruction, he twisted his wrist and pushed. Using his larger size to his advantage, he overwhelmed the woman through sheer power.

Unlike her sister, she lacked Life Fibers.

Which made her only -

" - human, right?"

"What?"

The woman's fingers flexed around Muramasa as the cursed blade thrust upwards, riposting his attack with effortlessly befitting a master teaching an apprentice, "Your thoughts are as predictable as your tactics."

"Is that so?"

Undeterred by her subtle threat, he stepped through the darkness once more. He moved at speeds only a handful of his comrades could follow. No longer fooling around nor playing with the woman, psychologically or otherwise, he manifested in the blink of an eye at her blind spot. Perched above the woman, whose impressive eyesight and focus had only begun tracking his darkness through the

metaphysical barrier separating one world from another, nothingness roared within his empty chest as he swung downwards.

"Yes -"

A heeled boot smashed into his stomach.

" - it is."

He did not hear the woman's words. It was only through recreation of the scene upon returning to the Castle That Never Was that he pieced together that final taunt. And it was only upon extracting himself from the chapel's furthest wall, debris and glass falling from his shoulders and arms, that he understood what she did.

"... the oldest trick in the book, was it?"

To fall for something so blatantly obvious. If he were capable of experiencing emotion, he'd be dying of embarrassment. He should have expected as much from one of the strongest denizens of light. He saw it clearly. He understood what Satsuki Kiryuin did. He could remember Ryuko's elder sister subtly adjusting her center of balance before he'd managed to so much as take a single step into the darkness. Her shoulders tightened. Her breathing softened. Her right foot twisted counterclockwise, granting her the posture necessary to pirouette as soon as he reappeared.

He remembered everything.

"S-Satsuki!?"

"Lady Satsuki?"

"What are... how did -?"

How foolish of him to presume something so trivial would catch Ryuko's sister off-guard. He should have anticipated a woman of her caliber would be capable of tracking movements through shadows. The lingering traces of pain - perhaps the first such time he could

remember experience agony since freeing his existence from the burden of a heart - slowly faded as he stepped through loosened rubble and granite, one hand holding his stomach and the other contained within impressive amounts of crackling energy.

"Sora - "

Satsuki Kiryuin's voice brooked no arguments. The sheer authority and superiority immediately silenced the young Keyblade wielder, " - you have no excuse, not one, for stealing my gummi ship without permission. I care not your reason. Nor why you came back to this place. Now take Goofy and Donald and leave. This man is far beyond your abilities. Understood?"

"Ah, uh, right."

He allowed Sora and his comrades to retreat without argument.

Moments passed.

An eternity completed itself as the boy's footsteps faded into the darkness.

And when he was alone, truly alone, with Ryuko's older sister standing across the chapel, he smirked. A cold and emotionless display of mirth. Yes. This was interesting. The strengths of their willpower and resolve electrified the atmosphere. Pebbles trembled around their feet as the overwhelming and oppressive silence suffocated reality. Yes. He could understand this. Satsuki Kiryuin's passion was impressive. If he had a heart... if he could feel anything beyond apathy and boredom... perhaps such a display would have achieved its desired effect.

"**Satsuki Kiryuin -**"

He spoke her name with well-deserved respect, breaching both the silence and immediately drawing her undivided attention upon himself, " - **your presence changes nothing.**"

"Is that so?"

It ebbed and flowed with every second. It started in the back of his mind, reaching a crescendo when Satsuki's stance subtly altered itself. Curiosity. And perhaps, yes, the memories were faded thanks to the endless passage of time, but something resembling apprehension clung to the emptiness where his heart once rested. He felt wary. An intriguing sensation influenced further when Satsuki Kiryuin raised Muramasa, light clinging to the cursed katana's edge.

"Fine then."

The woman's impassive façade tightened when he remained silent, "If you truly believe my presence changes nothing, allow Muramasa to rectify your mistaken assumptions."

"You misunderstood me, Satsuki Kiryuin, your presence changes nothing - "

A purplish-black miasma wafted from his eternal emptiness as an ethereal blade manifested into existence.

" - because I've already achieved my objective."

"Not if I kill you here and now, you haven't."

He was prepared this time.

Although her speed was impressive, her movements were far from perfect.

Drawing forth another ethereal blade from the nothingness in which he existed, he prepared himself for their eventual confrontation.

Clack!

Halfway across the chapel, Satsuki Kiryuin's heeled boot snap-clacked against the floor. One of dozens such unremarkable sounds over the last several minutes. But the very moment it connected,

toes curling as the impact propelled her forward, Muramasa shifting alongside the rest of her body, a supernova brighter than the midday sun exploded from her heart.

"Ugh!"

An overwhelming brilliance unlike anything he'd encountered during his brief nonexistence robbed darkness of meaning. The shadows themselves vanished underneath the inhuman radiance. He could not see. He could not sense anything. Something arrested his movements, slowing his reaction time and preventing him from retreating into the darkness. But he knew Satsuki Kiryuin was coming. Without thinking, relying purely upon experience, a tetragonal shield composed of quadrangular panels, each capable of releasing hundreds of volts of electrical magic against those who foolishly touched them, manifested between himself and Ryuko's sister.

Clang!

The wailing screech of orichalcum scraping against shimmering nothingness lasted an imperceptibly brief moment.

"Tch!"

But it was enough time for his sight to restore itself. Spots danced before his eyes as colors and shapes morphed into familiar and recognizable objects. The numbness plaguing body and soul vanished. He clenched both hands together in front of his body, energy crackling between them, as Satsuki Kiryuin back-flipped across the chapel, propped one hand against Muramasa's hilt and darted forward with enough speed that she shattered his barrier through sheer, overwhelming power.

"Now - "

His voice reverberated with the full weight of the shadows.

As the nauseating metallic ringing accompanying Satsuki Kiryuin's impressive accomplishment faded into the growing dusk, he'd already vanished. To stay behind and assume Ryuko's sister wouldn't somehow overwhelm such a meager barrier was foolishness. And thus, by the time Satsuki Kiryuin realized he'd abandoned his secured position for something, it was too late to do anything. Her path was set. Her posture overextended. Her movements impossible to adjust as he reappeared behind her, hands enveloped within identical spheres of crackling energy.

" - disintegrate!"

SHING!!!

He watched her movements.

He understood how she accomplished something so impressive.

Yet when Satsuki Kiryuin danced across existence upon streams of unyielding radiance, moving from one position to another in the metaphorical blink of an eye, he could not suppress the desire to know how she managed such a feat. But there was no time to think nor wonder not contemplate the origins of her technique. The darkness crackling around his fingers morphed and twisted, collapsing upon themselves only to flicker out of existence underneath the deluge of impossibly bright light radiating from Satsuki Kiryuin's heart. An impressive display of raw determination.

Time slowed to a crawl.

The slightest flutter of rustling cloth whispered against his ears as he leaned sideways, allowing Muramasa to skewer nothing but empty space.

He waited until she overextended herself before lurching backwards.

Planting one hand upon the ground, fingers gripping the contours of weathered masonry and stonework, he twisted counterclockwise,

driving his knee into the underside of her chin.

Blood spewed between tightly clenched teeth.

A hand reached towards his face.

He allowed her to do so.

But moments before Satsuki Kiryuin's fingers penetrated the shadows concealing his face from the light, he reversed their respective momentum. As his hand left the ground, gravity lost meaning and significance. No longer encumbered by something as trivial as weight, he allowed Ryuko's sister to scrap against the darkness before twisting sideways and grabbing her wrist before driving his elbow into the opposite shoulder, forcing Muramasa from her momentarily numbed fingers.

"How dare you!"

He did not expect her to be that limber.

Nor did he anticipate Satsuki Kiryuin willingly dislocating her arm, throw him over her shoulder with her remaining functioning arm before forcibly relocating the joint without relying upon restoration magic.

"No more!"

A pair of ethereal blades manifested as he caught himself mid-flight.

With darkness enveloping him, an aura of noxious shadows, he launched himself towards the woman already halfway across the room.

Over and over again, more times than he could fathom, they clashed blades.

CLANG!!! CLANG!!! CLANG!!! CLANG!!! CLANG!!

Gravity inverted and corrected itself every time he parried, riposted and deflected the cursed weapon.

Light and darkness crackled between their faces as the stalemate raged onward.

Rips and tears adorned his coat.

Likewise, despite not having landed any blows himself, Satsuki Kiryuin's clothing bore more than its fair share of damage.

Electricity crackled along the length of Satsuki Kiryuin's blade.

Light burned his obscured face.

KABOOM!!!

The energy building between their weapons reached critical mass, sending both himself and Satsuki Kiryuin faltering in opposite directions.

He recovered a split-second before Ryuko's sister.

WHAM!!!

Only to be driven onto one knee when Sora, having disobeyed Satsuki's orders and run back into the chapel despite knowing he didn't stand a chance, spent every last drop of magic into quadrupling his weight.

"Tch!"

It didn't take long to recover. No more than a second. Pushing himself back onto his feet, a strand of silver hair escaping the shadows of his hood, he caught Satsuki Kiryuin's sprinting towards him. Muramasa crashed through the space he'd been standing. A

purposeful division as she shifted her center of balance, leaned backward and drove her right foot into his stomach. The impact drove the air from his lungs. It sent him soaring through the chapel wall, darkness giving way to twilight sunset as he flipped head over heel, regained his balance and stood upon nothingness hundreds of meters above the ground.

"IT'S OVER!!!"

He glanced upwards as Satsuki Kiryuin descended through the air, Muramasa hefted overhead and heart shimmering with powerful light.

"KAMI NO HIKARI!!!"

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/d/de/Kill-la-kill-anime1.jpg/revision/latest?cb=20191019214442>]

"His strength was nothing special."

He dismissed the memories with a callous shrug.

"What about you?"

Nonchalance, or an adequate mimicry of the emotion he'd once possessed, accompanied the question, **"Do you consider yourself special?"**

"I don't know..."

He'd expected nothing from Roxas. At least, not yet. Things were moving quickly. The pieces were falling into position. Soon enough, the finale would begin. Everything he had spent years working towards - gathering twelve comrades and encouraging one bearing the Keyblade into capturing countless hearts - would culminate into a moment of unrivaled beauty and wonder impossible to articulate with words and thoughts.

Roxas was the Serendipitous Key.

But such power did not automatically grant him the thirteenth and final seat at the table. No, on the contrary and despite Xigbar's criticisms, Roxas was nothing more than an adequate backup.

A secondary vessel should the Replica Program prove... insufficient... compared to Ryuko.

Replica number twenty-four, the first and only successful integration of Life Fibers into a replica.

Thus, it was renamed replica number i.

Xion.

"What path do you choose? Light? Darkness? Or perhaps... nothingness?"

There was silence.

Contemplation.

Reflection.

"Who are you?"

The question penetrated the intensifying silence. Ah, at long last, Roxas demanded answers yet not of the questions he'd been asked. How amusing. If he could feel emotions, perhaps he would be laughing. But it was also fortuitous he could not feel emotions. For the disrespect laid upon his shoulders by one who knew nothing, and thus could doubt nothing, would have undoubtedly elicited retribution, **"I'm what's left. Or... maybe I'm all there ever was."**

"I meant your name."

"My name is of no importance. What about you? Do you remember anything? Can you remember your past?"

"My past..."

To be a nobody required one to lose their heart to darkness. Or simply, to lose their heart. Darkness was simply the easiest approach. However, if one possessed incredible willpower and determination, the abandoned soul becomes capable of granting the discarded body life. Yet without hearts, they were nothing more than incomplete shells. Vessels to be filled at the earliest convenience.

Sora's heart had fallen into darkness.

His discarded body and soul became Roxas.

That much happened.

But at the subtle behest of Beatrix and his grieving companions, one of the seven pure hearts painstakingly gathered by Maleficent managed to 'rescue' Sora's heart from the writhing darkness. With their combined efforts, Sora once more walked amongst the light. Which begged the question - who was Sora? Did the one calling herself Kairi reconstruct Sora's soul and body from memory? If Sora regained his original body and soul, what did that make Roxas? Furthermore, if Roxas was Sora's Nobody, why did they look nothing alike? A Nobody was one's discarded body and soul.

Any distinctions or differences between a Nobody and a Somebody were minimal.

Yet Roxas didn't resemble Sora in the slightest.

"I remember... someone called Ryuko."

"Good."

He allowed the slightest hint of inflection onto his voice, **"It would seem you haven't forgotten everything."**

"Ryuko...."

There was a significant pause before Roxas asked the question he'd anticipated for quite some time, "... do you know her?"

"In a manner of speaking..."

Emptiness swelled within his chest. Some of his brethren remembered everything. They could recall every moment of their previous lives. The false emotions worn upon their sleeves were proof enough. Some feigned happiness and boredom. Others focused on darker emotions such as anger, hatred and sadism. But in the end, they felt nothing. They couldn't feel anything, no matter how hard they might try.

But he was different.

His own past was lost, forgotten to the darkness. He could not remember anything before opening his eyes upon the world he'd once called home.

"... she's quite popular amongst the denizens of light."

Silence followed his admission.

"What do I do now?"

"You've been with us for six days."

He stood up, no longer preoccupied with the aftermath of Ryuko's battle against the Cloud of Darkness. His footsteps were heavy, carrying substantial weight as he lowered his hood with the same lack of urgency defining his existence.

"At long last... the time has come... for you to join us..."

Last edited: Jan 24, 2020

Chapter 17.2

"One man's failure is another man's success. Or something. Bah, who cares! This sword is perfect!"

~Gilgamesh~

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/9/99/Kill-la-kill-ryuuko.jpg/revision/latest?cb=20150413052859>]

"I'm not going to ask again!"

The imposter's silence ground upon her nerves, "Who are you!? Where's Gilgamesh!?"

"You're pixilated!"

This wasn't the first time she'd faced off with an imposter. Or a clone. Or someone pretending to be someone else in order to get close enough to stab her in the back. But no disguise was perfect. Like some of their hair covering an out-of-place and obvious eyepatch. And even if someone *could* make themselves look like someone else, unless they somehow copied their heart and memories, it was impossible to make everything perfect.

But this bastard had Gilgamesh's arrogance and boasting down to a science, "What the hell did you just call me?"

"Look it up if you're interested in expanding your vernacular!"

The fake Gilgamesh - because he was a fake no matter how perfectly he acted like the real deal - put on one hell of a show, huffing and puffing and otherwise acting like a complete and total asshole, "But to answer your question, there's only one Gilgamesh in all the realms - light and dark! One legend above all else! And that's me! That you believe I'd let some doppelgänger steal my reputation is authorial misconduct!"

Holy shit.

This imposter was *really* good.

He sounded betrayed. He looked betrayed. He even had Gilgamesh's slightly twitching eyebrow whenever the guy wanted to express his true emotions but didn't because - and she was quoting the bastard - real men don't announce their feelings. Hell, if she didn't know every other word spewing from his mouth was nonsensical bullshit, she might have actually believed him. Which is why she focused on the truth resting within her heart. Ignoring every distraction, she pushed through the garbage. And when the faker folded one pair of arms across his chest, stuck his nose into the air and claimed she was losing her mind, she simply remembered she was right and Gilgamesh - or whoever he was - was goddamn wrong.

"Nice try!"

She smiled.

It was a grin that did not quite reach her eyes.

It was a smirk that caused Gilgamesh - or rather, the unlucky bastard pretending to be her 'chosen rival' and all that nonsense - to nervously glance between herself and Mickey.

"But no matter what you say - "

She twisted her wrist ever-so-slightly, causing the dwindling sunlight to shimmer dangerously off the Scissor Blade, " - you're nothing but a half-assed fake!"

An eerie coldness seeped into the pit of Aqua's stomach.

It felt like only yesterday. It felt like it happened too many years ago. A blink of an eye lasting longer than an eternity. She remembered everything - every last detail, experience and memory. After

confronting the manifestation of her self-loathing and guilt... after realizing the darkness was finding cracks into her heart... and accepting there were simply things she couldn't have changed, not with all the power in the world... she'd stumbled across Terra and Ven. At first, they resembled illusions. Hallucinations conjured by the darkness to further torment her heart.

But then Terra talked.

And for an imperceptibly brief moment, she'd felt some measure of hope.

Only it had been nothing more than a horrible trick.

"If he's not Gilgamesh -"

Interlocking cubes, gold and silver against the setting sun, danced around her fingers as Master Eraqus's Keyblade materialized into existence. She should have known something was wrong. Terra was her friend. Her oldest and dearest friend. But Xehanort manipulated the connection between their hearts. In the guise of her best friend, feigning remorse for what happened, the horrible man played upon her guilt to learn the location of the Chamber of Waking. It had only been thanks to Terra resisting the shackles of darkness long enough to resist Xehanort that Ven remained safe.

But she didn't have the problem with Gilgamesh.

" - then who are you?"

No longer interested in the imposter's bold-faced lies and deceptions, bluish-white light shimmered around her Keyblade, "Where's the real Gilgamesh?"

"What is wrong with you people?"

There was little doubt in their minds Gilgamesh - or perhaps, the man pretending to be Gilgamesh - was sufficiently frustrated when

he tossed his hands into the air and released an aggravated grumble, "I AM Gilgamesh! It says so on my gummi ship license! What must I do to disprove this insane accusation?"

"He has a point, Ryuko."

Mickey *really* didn't want to believe Ryuko was onto something.

It wasn't someone copying Gilgamesh's appearance, personality and mannerisms to the point he hadn't realized something was wrong until Ryuko unraveled the single loose thread in their disguise that bothered him. Well, it was a problem. But not *the* problem. It wasn't what caused goosebumps to race down his arms. Or his ears to droop. Or his eyes to subtly furrow. The only things he could remember being capable of creating perfect copies of someone were the Unversed. But that was impossible. The Unversed had been created when Xehanort split Ven's heart into two pieces - one pure light and the other of darkness. And when Ven sacrificed himself to stop Vanitas, the Unversed had vanished from the realm of light.

But if Ryuko was right, who was this imposter and how did they managed to find them so deep in the realm of darkness?

"It's not that I don't believe you, it's just - "

He wracked his mind for the proper words before simply blurting them out, " - well, gosh, if, um, you have any proof he's not Gilgamesh, ya mind sharing it?"

"Proof, huh?"

The question gently rolled around Ryuko's mouth as the Scissor Blade, perhaps responding to Mickey's curiosity, lowered away from the imposter's face, "Yeah, I've got proof."

She breathed in.

Then out.

But even as her gaze sharpened, senses honed to the point she was ready for any sudden nonsense, a sense of unnerving calmness washed over her heart.

She couldn't blame Mickey's doubts about Gilgamesh being replaced by some nearly perfect imposter. Something like this wasn't easy to swallow. A villain kidnapping Gilgamesh out of the realm of darkness and leaving a perfect double in his place? Yeah, she could see why that sounded freaking nuts. But her heart was yelling loud and clear - whoever this asshole was, he *wasn't* Gilgamesh. This wasn't the same guy who screwed her and Satsuki on Arendelle. This wasn't the moron who proclaimed to *everyone* about being rivals. And he wasn't the bastard who asked at least four times every year to fight mano-a-mano like men.

Or women.

Or women who behaved like men.

The sound of her fist colliding with Gilgamesh's jaw after that last comment still brought a smile to her face.

"While we were waitin' for the cloud of bullshit to claw its way through the darkness, Gilgamesh mentioned meeting you and Aqua. It's because of him I knew she was somewhere in this place."

A slight tremble shook the Scissor Blade as her voice slowly, yet with unnatural steadiness, darkened.

"But after waking up with my head in the sand, suddenly *this* guy didn't know Aqua. He'd never even heard of her."

Having said what she wanted to say, she once more raised the Scissor Blade until it was pointed squarely between the imposter's eyes, "Which means somewhere along the line, this faker replaced the real Gilgamesh!"

"That's not proof of anything nefarious!"

Gilgamesh - or the fake Gilgamesh - scoffed derisively before having the audacity to look ashamed, "Granted, err, I'll admit forgetting about Aqua sounds a little suspicious. But after you destroyed that beast, I was so overwhelmed it must've slipped my mind. And are *you* really going to lecture me about forgetting someone's name? Or must I remind you of what happened during last year's Festival of Champions?"

"Oh, I know."

Her mouth stretched into an unnerving yet victorious smirk, "That's why I came up with a trap."

"... a trap?"

"I was only half-lying, you know, about telling Gilgamesh something really important."

Blurting out Tsumugu had been a spur-of-the-moment decision. A half-assed plan that risked everything on the remote chance Gilgamesh wasn't simply acting funny. Or hit his head on a rock. One that made her feel like someone poured a cold water down her back. But one that *worked*, "But too bad for you, it wasn't Tsumugu. Or anything close to it. That's how I knew you're a fake! Because the real Gilgamesh would've said something freaking stupid about Tsumugu and why I wanted him to remember something completely different!"

"Tsumugu?"

Aqua's mouth opened and closed before she spoke the question collectively inside both her and Mickey's minds, "Did you - were they someone important to you?"

"People and clothing can't communicate. And they can't be friends. It's impossible."

"Eh... not really."

Adjusting her grip on the Scissor Blade just enough for her fingers to slip down the grooved handle, Ryuko pushed the thoughts to the back of her mind, "Just someone who wouldn't mind his name being used to bring down an imposter!"

She hadn't exactly disliked the guy. Not nearly as much as that exhibitionist posing as her homeroom teacher. Mikisugi or something. But the past was the past. Nothing could change what happened. Not her. Not Satsuki. And certainly not anyone who gave themselves over to darkness, heart and all. A lot of time passed since losing her world to the darkness. More than she could bear. But no matter how long she'd live, those memories, good and bad, one thought always rose to the surface of her heart.

It sounded freaking cliché, but absolutely nobody, not even Nui goddamn Harime, deserved losing their hearts.

"Oh, one more thing."

With a half-cocked grin and adrenaline flowing through her veins, the Scissor Blade vibrated between her tightening fingers, "I don't know who the hell YOU are, but the *real* Gilgamesh doesn't smell like death warmed over!"

Before she even finished, Ryuko knew the imposter wasn't going down without a fight.

[Which was perfect.](#)

Darkness brushed against her face as the boisterous phony sunk into the surrounding shadows. Her hair rippled the wake of his departure. The corners of her mouth twisted. Piercing blue eyes flickered back and forth. A hiss of air escaped her throat. Her heart beat a mile a minute. She heard Mickey's reaction to something. She felt magic gathering around Aqua's Keyblade. Hardened Life Fibers groaned between her tightening fingers as something in the corner of her eye caught her attention.

CLANG!!!

A deep ruby light confessed the Scissor Blade's lethal trail as she spun around, intercepting a 'legendary weapon' resembling Galatyn only with subtle differences.

"Impressive swordsmanship, Ryuko!"

And just like that, the fake Gilgamesh's expression darkened.

"But I'm just getting started!"

The world spun in tightening circles as her head whipsawed, vision darkening around the edges.

"Uhn!"

A dollop of crimson and spittle escaped her lips as the darkness powering the fake swordsman's sucker punch smashed into her cheek.

But with a *stomp*, 'Gilgamesh's' clenched fist still grinding itself into her cheek while slowly twisting counterclockwise, Ryuko drove her foot into the ground, sending a blinding cloud of sand and water raining upon her clothes. And beneath the blood dribbling down the corners her chin, as she took one step forward and then another, slowly but steadily forcing the bastard's elbow inwards, crimson twinkled throughout the vermilion undertone staining her hair.

And she *smirked*.

Not smiled.

Not grinned.

But *smirked* at the uncertainty in the imposter's eyes.

"Heh, is that all you -"

The taunt sputtered into nonsensical gibberish when 'Gilgamesh' kicked her stomach.

Hard.

And then *pushed*.

With an ear-splitting metallic *clang* echoing throughout the deepest recesses of the realm of darkness, she transposed the Scissor Blade between herself and Gilgamesh's fake as fast as physically possible. His Genji Armor smashed against hardened Life Fibers in a contest of pure physical prowess obtained through excruciating training and practice against inherited strength. At the exact moment his foot collided with her Scissor Blade, knee fully extended and muscles bulging beneath his white and red polka-dotted pants, the imposter unleashed a wave of darkness in the shape of a clenched fist.

"Gah... hah... hah..."

By the time she stopped sliding down the beach, her back was pressing against the ruined dock.

"Alright, screw this bullshit!"

She could hear Mickey and Aqua in the background. But their voices were muted. Deafened underneath the fury fueling her heart. But enough was enough! She was sick and tired of the fake asshole's nonsense! Hissing underneath her breath, blood trickling from the side of her mouth, she dragged her tongue against the inside of her cheek, spun the Scissor Blade several times around her wrist and sprinted back into the fray.

"I'm gonna kick your goddamn -"

Her eyes widened when the imposter vanished.

"Muhahahaha!!!"

Perched overhead, knees tucked against his chest and an eerily accurate mockery of Galatyn clasped in one hand and Zantetsuken in another, the imposter's laughter clawed against her mind like nails on a chalkboard.

"Feel my righteous fury, Ryuko! And the cold, metallic taste of my blades!"

KABOOM!!!

The dock pressing against her back exploded into splinters.

The ground beneath her feet cratered.

As if drawn backwards by an incoming tsunami, the ocean receded until every last drop of water in the area evaporated.

Light and darkness threatened to rip reality asunder as the bastard sliced through the heavens, smashing his faux legendary bullshit against her Scissor Blade with sufficient pressure to fracture several bones. Underneath the ear-splitting *clang* resembling the wailing screams of a grieving widow, sparks danced and burned. Flashes of incomprehensible colors and sounds. Smells she couldn't recognize. A wind of razor-sharp blades rustling her hair. A multicolored barrage that made it impossible to see the imposter's conniving smirk resembling Gilgamesh's normal arrogance just a little too much for comfort.

"You... freaking..."

But even focused on holding back the faker's darkness, which was starting to wear on her nerves, she wasn't blind.

He was trying to *shatter* the Scissor Blade.

And that seriously pissed her off.

"... dipshit!"

She didn't know if it was possible to break the Scissor Blades. A ton of people tried. Some of them stronger than Gilgamesh. They'd gone toe-to-toe with Keyblades. They'd withstood some of the toughest magics and strongest bullshit in the realm of light without so much as a scratch. But her mom shattered Bakuzan not once, but twice, with nothing but her bare hands.

"Like I'm... gonna let you... do that!!!"

Spitting the threat between annoyed hisses and convulsed gasps, she lurched sideways, skating across the ocean's roiling surface as if it was nothing more than glass. Behind her, the legendary knockoffs smashed against the beach, kicking up a ton of dust and debris and causing the entire island to momentarily tremble. But having already arrested her momentum and spun around in a tight arc, water carving through the night sky while catching the fading sunset upon scintillating baubles no larger than raindrops, she spat out a glob of coppery blood, flipped the Scissor Blade until she was grasping the reverse edge and *rocketed* towards the imposter.

CLANG!!!

Their blades met in a burst of light and darkness.

Over and over and over, she tried breaking through the fake bastard's guard. She tried everything except magic, which she couldn't use at the moment, only for the imposter's copies of Gilgamesh's legendary bullshit to intercept the Scissor Blade. Shit! God damn it! Not only did this guy look like Gilgamesh. And talk like the guy. Not only did he have the bastard's skills and swordsmanship down to a freaking science. But his darkness was unreal and getting stronger by the second.

All she needed was an opening.

Just one.

A split-second break.

"RYUKO!!!"

How the hell had she forgotten about Mickey and Aqua?

"You dare challenge a legend!?"

Through one half-opened eye and another partially blinded by blood pouring from a slowly healing gash carving across her forehead, she watched Aqua and Mickey launch themselves towards the fake swordsman from opposite ends of the beach. Magic, bitterly cold to the point the nearby ocean spontaneously began freezing, shimmered around Aqua's Keyblade while whitish-gold light, powerful yet soothing and warm, surrounded Mickey's. They moved in synch - Aqua racing across the ocean's surface while Mickey approached via jumping and leaping through the treehouse, hoping to split the imposter's attention between herself and them.

"But three against one?"

Without taking his eyes off her Scissor Blade, the fake Gilgamesh's middle pair of hands flexed, summoning an additional pair of copycat legendary weapons.

"Yes! That's more my style!"

The instant 'Gilgamesh's' attention shifted towards Aqua and then Mickey, in that order, Ryuko *moved*.

She knew how fast the real Gilgamesh could react. She adjusted accordingly, presuming his doppelgänger was even faster thanks to darkness. Sucking in a mouthful of air, she swung the Scissor Blade not to hit the fake bastard. Not to knock Galatyn and Zantetsuken off-kilter. But to draw his attention away from Mickey and Aqua. And it worked. With the roaring wind kicked up by their constant attacks and counterattacks brushing against her face, she danced upon streams of crimson and gold. Her coat rustled as she planted her

foot against the sand, heel dragging through the shifting dunes and swung, leaving 'Gilgamesh' with two options.

Deal with *her* and accept the inevitability of Mickey and Aqua kicking his ass.

Or stop Mickey and Aqua while knowing the Scissor Blade was gunning for him.

"I take option number three!"

With as little effort as a man his size could exert, 'Gilgamesh' spun around, parried Mickey and Aqua's Keyblade before using their own momentum to send them flying into the ocean and beach respectively.

Right before lurching sideways, Scissor Blade carving through his Genji Armor without hitting anything underneath.

"COME ON!!!!!"

Something as bullshit as a goddamn third option was standard issue when it came to Gilgamesh. Cheating? Taking shortcuts? Discovering loopholes? The bastard was annoying. Why would his doppelgänger be any different?

"AAAAAAHHHHH!!!!!"

Flipping the Scissor Blade into a reverse grip just as she reached the very climax of her swing, Ryuko planted her foot into the sand, lurched towards 'Gilgamesh' while ducking beneath the pair of copycat weapons carving towards her neck. Strands of crimson fluttered in front of her eyes. The wind whispered as she danced between another set of faux greatswords resembling Gilgamesh's stolen weapons only with subtle differences. Springing forward, her fingers shifted down the Scissor Blade's handle, setting in the curved grooves and a single heartbeat from extending into Decapitation Mode.

Pain *blossomed* when the imposter's knee smashed against her hand, shattering bones and bending her fingers in obscene angles.

"SHIT!!!"

Unable to hold onto the Scissor Blade, she was forced to watch the weapon flip blade over handle several dozen times per second before stabbing edge-down into the tree house.

"YOU SON OF A -"

Bone and cartilage snapped back into proper position with sickening *squelches*. Shattered fingers that would take months to heal - minutes to hours with restoration magic - mended themselves in seconds. Pain vanished, replaced by pure rage. And by the time she swung her fist towards the imposter, whose expression implied he'd long-since realized how much he'd fucked up, she felt good as new.

No, better than freaking new.

" - BITCH!!!"

Galatyn and Zantetsuken and two other swords whose names she couldn't bother remembering at the moment exploded into too many pieces of metal, crystal and darkness to count as her fist smashed through them on the way to the faker's stomach.

WHAM!!!

The Genji Armor - or the copy of Gilgamesh's 'legendary' armor - buckled.

"RRRRRAAAAAGGGGGGHHHH!!!!"

Metal shattered. Not splintered or cracked. Or even dented. But *shattered* as her knuckles, covered by the thinnest of materials, punched through legendary metal like it was nothing but wet paper caught outside in a thunderstorm. As she screamed, throat growing increasingly hoarse, light flowed from her thrumming heart. A low

hum rapidly cascaded until what sounded like a raging cacophony overwhelmed the island's natural ambience. A pulse of exceptionally bright crimson illuminated the world as she pushed forward, stomped into the imposter's personal space, glared through narrowing eyes at his terrified expression and *pushed*.

The explosion of flames, light and anger as the fake swordsman rocketed through the air, hitting the side of Besaid Island with a wince-inducing *thud*, would've made Mako proud.

Last edited: Jan 30, 2020

Chapter 17.3

She really should've been angrier.

Like screaming-into-the heavens furious.

It wouldn't be the first time.

Well, it would be the first time she'd *really* lost her temper since re-kicking the shit out of Nui Harime.

But as Gilgamesh's imposter crashed into the enormous tree planted smack-dab in the middle of Besaid Island, wood splintering around the point of impact, Ryuko realized her heart had traveled beyond 'pissed-the-hell-off,' took a sharp turn past 'seething rage' and gunned straight into 'I-don't-give-a-crap' mode.

"Gotta hand it to ya," more than enough venom clung to Ryuko's voice to kill an elephant as she dragged her tongue around her mouth and spat out a glob of blood previously pooling in the back of her throat, "You really know how to piss a woman off!"

Nothing about anything made sense. Doppelgänger or not, decking someone wearing Gilgamesh's face should have felt amazing. But she felt hollow. Almost empty. Her heart devoid of satisfaction. And it didn't take a genius to understand why. It was obvious. It was beyond obvious! No matter how much they looked alike - hell, fought and acted alike - this faker wasn't the son of a bitch who left her and Satsuki out to dry for his crimes on Arendelle.

"Now buckle up!"

Snorting out the side of her mouth, she ground one set of knuckles against the other. Like the real Gilgamesh whenever something went south, his imposter was playing possum. But she wasn't born yesterday. It pained her to admit, but Gilgamesh was built like an exceptionally tough gummi ship on steroids. Someone pretending to

be Gilgamesh would know not to go down after one punch to the stomach!

"Because you're about to experience a world of - huh?"

Thump!

Caught off-guard by the absurdity, Ryuko watched Gilgamesh's poser slide down the enormous tree, smash their chin against the shoddy wooden fort, roll awkwardly over the banister and fall head-first onto weathered steps leading from the beach All without looking like he was still conscious.

Whoever this asshole was, he was dedicated to acting like Gilgamesh.

But as soon as it popped into her heart, Ryuko tossed the thought into the garbage, "Ugh, whatever."

The threads were barely visible the naked eye, let alone those without any clue what they were looking for. And while she wasn't the best at doing it, even after practicing until her fingers bled, she wasn't an amateur. Or an expert, no matter how many times Satsuki claimed it would come in handy. It was just doing so, even for something as simple as wrapping them around Threadcutter, left a disgusting taste that lingered far beyond its expiration date.

Today was no different.

"Alright, here's the deal."

Her mouth twitched as a tranquil calmness, independent of the frustration bubbling through her veins, washed over her heart. She was still angry. Oh, she was pissed off. But reaching into the darkness without tearing her eyes away from Gilgamesh's second-rate imposter, Ryuko knew better than goddamn anyone how robotic and unnatural her movements looked as Life Fibers, each no thicker than strands of hair, punctured the tips of her gloves, snaked through

the darkness and wrapped around the Scissor Blade sunk halfway in another tree.

"You have until three to get up - "

The threads pulled taut with an audible, to her at least, *twang*.

" - before I start wailing on your ass!"

Clenching her fingers until the crimson fibers resembled a mishmash of tangled cords and wires, she listened to the growing whine on the darkness before reaching out and catching the Scissor Blade.

"One!"

If the son of a bitch thought she'd hold back against an unarmed opponent, he was in for a rude awakening. Social etiquette? Decorum? Honor? That stuff was for friends, family and parties filled with stuck-up noble assholes who never worked an honest day work in their lives. Not psychopaths who leapt head-first into darkness without holding their breath. How the hell was it 'beneath the station of a respected Keyblade Master' to break a villain's nose after they surrendered? Especially if they were the same psychopath who'd tried unleashing a horde of Heartless ten minutes before she'd kicked down the front door of their castle.

"Two!"

The answer was - it goddamn wasn't!

"Three!"

It took a fraction of a second, maybe half that, to reach the bastard, an explosion of abrupt momentum kicking up a large cloud of sand and water in her wake.

Reality dissolved into a mishmash of colors and sounds resembling one of those abstract paintings that looked like someone threw up on the canvass but Satsuki *and* Mako somehow found deeper meaning

in. Her hair fluttered wildly. Her coat rustled. Sleeves flapped. One of the zipper strings smacked her in the nose. But before the annoyance registered, almost like an overextended rubber band, space-time snapped. Skating upon upsurges of light, she materialized next to the faker's soon-to-be-broken body, boots digging trenches into the ground and Scissor Blade curled so far over her shoulder she could almost kiss the inside of her elbow.

She fully intended on hitting the bastard.

But at the last possible second, she stopped.

And stared.

And stared.

And *stared*.

"REALLY!?"

She'd seen some crazy shit. Stuff her younger self, even with the bullshit that was Honnouji Academy, would find ridiculous. But *this* was so over-the-top ridiculous her heart not only crashed, earning a twitching eyebrow, but rebooted itself over and over again in some vain hope of understanding an underlying truth. A series of strangled grunts, noises and sounds impossible for any human throat and mouth to replicate, let alone speak, etched themselves onto the darkness as she stood over the imposter, Scissor Blade trembling inches above his shoulder.

Through seething teeth and a jaw clenched to the point her nerves were on fire, Ryuko swallowed what she truly wanted to say.

Not because it was too vulgar.

But because the moron who *needed* to hear it currently was unable to hear anything.

"Ugh - "

Or at least, she tried screaming, " - this is such bullshit."

Because her energy was simply gone. She had nothing left. Not a thing.

Bulldozing through too many Heartless to count and taking down the mega-bitch had drained nearly everything from her heart. She was *tired*. She was exhausted. She wanted nothing more than to go home, eat something loaded with fat and salt, take a hot shower and sleep for an entire month. Maybe even a year. But not yet. Not until they closed the door oozing darkness onto the worlds and stopping the Heartless. But she didn't know where to start looking. Only Mickey knew. And since he wasn't back from wherever the imposter sent him flying, the only thing she could do was wait.

Which she did by opening her arms and letting gravity pull her down onto the sand.

"Ryuko?"

Maybe it was the way time didn't work in the realm of darkness, but it couldn't have been more than a handful of seconds before Aqua emerged from the ocean, soaked head to toe and hair matted against her forehead, "Did you - "

" - nah, he's still breathing,"

Laying spread-eagle on the beach, Scissor Blade resting on the palm of her hand, Ryuko tried sitting up only to regret her decision when all the blood in her head plummeted straight

to her feet, "Ugh, thought he'd be tougher. You know, like the real Gilgamesh. That bastard could take a punch. But this guy? Tch, I shouldn't be disappointed. And yet, I'm complaining about an easy fight. What the hell's wrong with me?"

As Ryuko grumbled into the sand, a world-weary smile pulled on Aqua's lips, "I'm glad you're alright."

She would have said more. There was so much she wanted to talk about. But when Mickey leapt over a nearby dune, little worse for wear but otherwise fine after Gilgamesh's double effortlessly tossed them through the air, her brow creased, "Did you find out who he was?"

"No."

Ryuko meant to add 'not yet' or 'I wanted to after he wakes up,' but was too tired to care, "Whoever he was, he fought like Gilgamesh. I mean, just like the guy. It was kinda freaky."

Arriving in a huff of breath, covered in sand and dirt and several types of strange leaves indigenous to the Destiny Islands stuck awkwardly to his clothes, Mickey stroked his chin and frowned, "Hmm... you may be onto something, Ryuko. Some of those moves were awfully familiar."

"Tell me about it," the hot-tempered master knew that particular tone. She knew that puzzled expression. And like a moth drawn to a flame, Ryuko jumped off the ground, stomped her foot against the Scissor Blade, caught it mid-air and pretended getting up so quickly hadn't left her extremely dizzy, "I'm guessing you figured something out."

"Maybe."

It pained him to admit, but he really didn't know where to start. And not due to a lack of experience. The realm of light was enormous. Its mysteries endless. One could travel months to years and come across things nobody else had seen. But someone disguising themselves so perfectly as Gilgamesh, including his mannerisms and fighting style, to the point it took Ryuko coming up with a convoluted plot to prove they weren't the real Gilgamesh?

That didn't sit right with his heart.

In fact, from what he could gather, Ryuko hadn't settled on bringing Gilgamesh along for the ride until the very last second.

"Well, it's only a theory," he added after a moment's hesitation, "But Master Yen Sid once said some Heartless can manipulate the darkness within the hearts of those who've strayed too far from the light."

The Keyblade-wielding mouse king noticed something peculiar in Ryuko's eyes. A strange glint impossible to miss. One similar to Aqua's yet harder. More focused and intense. And who could blame them? None of this - from Ryuko following him, the Cloud of Darkness reawakening much sooner than Merlin said, Gilgamesh's inexplicable betrayal and finding a lost friend alive and well - had been planned. Not that he was complaining about finding Aqua. But cautiously approaching the downed figure next to Ryuko, Keyblade in hand and magic at the ready, he scratched his chin.

"From what I can gather, Gilgamesh was acting normal before you stopped the Cloud of Darkness. Well, as normal as he can be. But afterwards, he suddenly forgot some things. I still don't have all the pieces... and some things don't add up... but it's quite possible Gilgamesh stumbled across one of these Heartless," Mickey continued."

An exhausted scoff from the base of Ryuko's chest answered his question, "Nah, that wasn't Gilgamesh."

"Huh, it can't? How do ya know, Ryuko?"

"Because his swords were fake as hell," rolling her eyes, Ryuko jabbed a thumb towards the discombobulated mess of broken metal, shattered crystals and destroyed dreams scattered across the beach, "They're called legendary for a good reason. If they'd been the real deal, my hand would be a broken mess. Trust me. Those things are tough."

That made a lot of sense.

"Well, um, maybe the guy somehow... copied... Gilgamesh's memories?"

As soon as the words passed through his mouth, Mickey immediately regretted saying them. The theory wasn't stupid. It had merit and made sense. Plus, it explained quite a fair bit while filling in some of the blanks. But the concept of someone copying Gilgamesh's memories was simply too farfetched and convoluted to possibly be true. Memories were stored inside one's heart. They might be forgotten as new memories form, but no matter how much time passed, they never truly disappeared. But copying memories? Such a thing implied Gilgamesh - or whoever this was - could manipulate the heart in ways previously believed impossible.

"Of course, that's only a theory, not something I actually -"

A drawn-out groan interrupted him.

"Haaaaaaaahhhh...."

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Resist the urge to kick herself in the ass.

Then breathe again.

"Alright."

An upswell of anger poured out of Ryuko's heart. But instead of losing control and doing something she might regret, she closed her eyes, breathed through her nose and waited until the burning in her lungs all but extinguished her frustration. But she didn't. She wasn't some punk hitchhiking across Japan from one high school to the next, beating the information about who killed her dad out of every student who crossed her path.

Not anymore.

Yet for all her self-control and maturity, the Scissor Blade creaked between her fingers, "know *exactly* who we're dealing with."

Mickey faltered, "You do?"

Followed by Aqua's awareness moving from the downed imposter quickly enough Ryuko didn't know if she was talking to her or Mickey, "How?"

It sounded stupid. *She* looked stupid. It should've been obvious something was seriously up when 'Gilgamesh' denied knowing Gogo. His answer had been a little too forceful. A little too certain for a guy who claimed to know hundreds of people, most of whom hated his guts. It's why she sauntered towards the unconscious son of a bitch, covering the nearly two meters in a casual saunter, mind made up and heart settled on the most appropriate course of action.

"Simple," chewing on the inside of her cheek, she wedged a foot underneath the faker's body and effortlessly flipping several hundred pounds of muscle, armor and haughtiness like an oversized pancake, "I've been traveling with this so-called 'master of the simulacrum' for the last who-knows-how-many days!"

At this point, Aqua and Mickey were paying attention to her every word, which meant explaining everything, something she really wasn't good at, "His name's Gogo. Not sure if that's his real name. He claimed he could 'instinctively' connect his heart with others, letting him copy any ability he wanted. Wore gaudy as hell clothes and always avoiding giving a straight answer about who he was and how he got lost inside the darkness. Now we know. And if you'll excuse me..."

Breathing deeply through her nose, she cupped one hand around her mouth and screamed into the bastard's ear.

"WAKE UP!!!"

Only nothing happened.

"I said - "

Prompting her to smash the blunt edge of the Scissor Blade against his stomach," - wake up!"

A hawking cough immediately lightened her mood.

"Rise and shine, sleeping beauty."

As the self-professed mimic slowly regained consciousness, one second dragged relentlessly to the next. It wasn't a quick process, not with multiple contusions and broken bones she could have healed, easily, but didn't. Oh, and most likely an awful headache. But Gog eventually opened his eyes. He looked around. And like the good friend she was, Ryuko crouched next to him, Scissor Blade bouncing against her shoulder, elbow propped on her knee and a shit-eating grin stretching across her face, "Aw, trouble breathing? Can't blame ya. I heard broken ribs are a reeeaally pain in the ass."

She waited for his reaction.

If Gogo was truly committed to being Gilgamesh, he'd leap onto his feet, broken ribs or not, and pull some crazy plan out of his freaking ass. But he did nothing. He said nothing. And for some reason, that bothered her.

A lot.

"Anyway, gotta say, your impersonation wasn't half bad," wiping a trace of dried blood off her cheek, Ryuko leaned forward, "Would've fallen for it if ya hadn't missed a few important details."

"I am... no fake..."

"Suuurreee you aren't."

Gogo's refusal smacked against her heart with the force of a wet rag. She heard them. She listened to them. And promptly ignored them. Damn, this was pathetic. It was one thing to commit to an act. She

had to give Gogo props for that. But what was the point when everybody already knew he wasn't Gilgamesh?

"Here's the deal - you're going to tell us who you're working for and what happened to the real Gilgamesh.

Her nose twitched when a familiar smell, nothing like Gogo's bad breath or rotten seaweed decomposing on the beach, penetrated her heart. Only something was different. Whatever it was, it no longer resembled wet dog rolling in week-old shit on a hot summer day. There was something else. Something underneath the obnoxious odor. Something that made her want to hurl, "And maybe we don't kick your ass. How's that sound?"

"I am no... fake..."

"Hey, you listenin'?"

"I am... no... fake..."

Something wasn't right.

Gogo repeating himself over and over again was a major sign something was seriously wrong. People didn't do that. Nobody said the same thing over and over. Not unless they were some sort of robot. Or a puppet. Or an artificial intelligence programmed to act, look and fight like Gilgamesh breaking down under pressure.

"I... I... I... I..."

But by the time Ryuko reacted, caution eagerly thrown to the wind as she grabbed the imposter's knockoff scarf, Aqua and Mickey having already drawn their Keyblades after sensing the same thing she did, it was already far too late.

"I... I..."

Crack!

Starting with his arms and legs, every bone in the faker's body shattered.

If she'd eaten lunch, or anything in the last couple of weeks, Ryuko was pretty sure she would've it thrown up.

"... am... aaaammm... aaaammm..."

As the imposter twitched and spasmed, the crimson scarf wrapped around his neck, tattered and ugly, just like the one Gilgamesh never took off, fused into his skin, long-suppressed memories flooded her heart.

In that moment, gasping for breath and unable to speak, she remembered everything. Every last detail flashed before her wavering eyes. Nui Harime's insidious laughter after proudly admitting she killed her dad, not Satsuki. Hatred bubbling within her heart. Spittle flying between her teeth as she threw everything at the psychopath. The Scissor Blade slicing empty space as the blonde bitch purposely dodged by the skin of her teeth, always just one step ahead of them. Senketsu desperately trying to break through the anger contorting her heart as her blood grew hotter and hotter until it was nearly boiling.

And his screams when her darkness proved too much for him to handle.

It all came back.

She remembered everything.

"... n-no... nnnnooo"

Unable to formulate words or thoughts, Ryuko bit the inside of her cheek hard enough for blood to dribble from the corners of her mouth as vermilion light oozed from dancing cracks in the mutating figure's skin. Claws, some larger than others, some possessing more joints and yet others bending the wrong way yet distinctly resembling

phalanges, grasped heaping scoops of sand as they forced their enormous body off the sand. One arm swelled, shattering the Genji Armor into pieces. Another warped and transformed, muscles growing several times their normal size as the knockoff armor fused into its darkening flesh.

"... f-f-f-f-f..."

It started as a trickle.

Then a river.

Copious amounts of blood, steaming from the incredible heat, gushed through glowing cracks crisscrossing sickening green flesh as its head snapped upwards, displaying far too many teeth on a mouth far, far too small to hold them.

"GRRRRRAAAAAUUUUUUU!!!!"

Driven neither by instinct nor honed reflexes, but haunting memory, only from the other side of the equation, Ryuko kicked the terrifying son of a bitch. She didn't hold anything back as her foot sunk into its chest, putty-like flesh collapsing upon itself alongside another torrent of steaming blood and all-too-familiar threads glowing with a deep red light. And pushing forward while bending her knee, lips pulled into a snarling grimace retaining every ounce of the disbelief coursing through her heart, she sent the monster crashing through the center of Besaid Island and out the other side.

And only then did she lean backwards and jump in the opposite direction.

"God freaking damn it!"

Moments after clearing the beach... then the shallows... then another hundred or so meters into deeper water... feet sinking several inches before she managed something resembling a

graceful landing, Ryuko bit her lower lip, gasped for breath and tried not to panic, "How the fuck are they here!?"

A noticeable tremor affected the Scissor Blade when another scream, far enough away that it echoed in the darkness, reached her ears, "It's impossible! There's no -"

It made sense.

Suddenly, everything made perfect sense.

But before she could give voice and life to the uncountable number of vulgarities bubbling in the depths of her heart, some of which were never meant to see the light of day, Mickey and Aqua haphazardly landed on the water, the latter nearly speechless by the horrifying abomination whose breath had recently caressed her face, "What... what is that thing?"

Once again, Mickey didn't know anything.

Years of studying the most esoteric and obscure mysteries of the worlds and yet he was baffled. But something drew his attention. Something unexpected - this monster's formidable darkness, for some inexplicable reason, heavily resembled Ryuko's, "I... I don't know."

"I *knew* she went down too easy!"

Torn between understanding *what* was happening, even if he didn't possibly know where to begin, and Ryuko's blasé reaction, Mickey made up his mind when she flipped the Scissor Blade around her wrist, caught it between her fingers and snapped, twisted her upper body and snapped the weapon towards the creature one disguised as Gilgamesh hard enough that it audibly *shone*.

"Mickey. Aqua. Keep looking for that door."

No longer focused on the past but what she needed to do to protect the present and future, she reached for the other Scissor Blade - something she'd taken on a whim - and yanked it off her neck, ["I've got some shit to deal with."](#)

And with a snap of her wrist, the miniaturized blade matched the one in her other hand, "And it might take a while."

Last edited: Feb 9, 2020

Unknown Report 17

Unknown Report 17

["Very, very good."](#)

The Chamber of Ruminatation laid deep within Castle Oblivion's non-Euclidian geometry.

It was a simple room. No different than the other chambers throughout the appropriated bastion. Only a handful of Nobodies, countable on a single hand with fingers to spare, were aware of the chamber's existence. And of those Nobodies, all but one implied the room possessed a form of inherent malevolence laying deeper than emotions. An eldritch presence dealing with his research. He, on the other hand, found the room, hermetically sealed and incapable of being accessed except through corridors of darkness, rather idyllic.

"And thus, my hypothesis was proven correct."

Perhaps it was the specialized machinery humming in the background, most of which bore the Organization's emblem. Or perhaps it resulted from the heavily modified Memory Pod large enough to hold someone of modest build yet empty at the moment attached to far too many wires, cables and cords to count. Or perhaps the answer laid within the multifaceted sphere above the closed lotus-shaped pod, kept aloft by tubes and insulated conduits feeding into the latter structure, crimson light radiating from shatter and magic-proof glass.

Hand pressed against his mouth, elongated sleeve covering his lower face, Vexen observed the pixelated image - that of Ryuko Matoi wearing an Organization's coat - with fascination.

"Or nearly so," he added, amending his previous statement.

"As theorized, it appears that if someone's heart lays close enough to a replica's archetype, be they friend or ally, and enough time elapses between data collection and the replication progress, they can 'spot the thread,' so to speak," the academic's perfunctory scowl lightened into an introspective frown. Ignoring the image's atrocious quality, degradation arising from transmitting within the realm of darkness, he plucked his lips at Ryuko's expression, "I really should've have expected nothing less from someone of Ryuko Matoi's caliber."

Such an egregious bluff.

Or was it?

He wouldn't be much of a scientist to overlooking an answer simply because he didn't think it were possible. If it were, in fact, nothing more than a bluff, the master's cavalier behavior implied she'd already determined the truth about replica number thirteen. Impressive. And expected, although somewhat disappointing. But it was her final rationale for raising that reinforced Life Fiber blade which provoked his interest. Tsumugu - nonsensical gibberish Ryuko Matoi created out of whole cloth to convince his creation of a fabricated conversation she'd had with the original Gilgamesh.

Or perhaps not.

"Still - even if replica number thirteen was an older model, it was physically indistinguishable from the original."

Theories swirled within his mind. He moved from one hypothesis to the next, never dwelling on more than one at a time. It sounded ridiculous. But underneath her brusque demeanor and capricious arrogance, belonging less to a master and more to a backwater dilettante, Ryuko was unnervingly observant, "Which begs the question - how did she determine there was something different about my creation?"

Standard Memory Replica Model Thirteen - replica number thirteen, for those unable to remember something trivially simple - had been his first *genuine* success.

Yet the replication process remained far from perfect.

Contrary to popular belief, one couldn't simply invent a revolutionary new idea. The world didn't work that way. Science and progress weren't straightforward. The path of knowledge required blood, sweat and innumerable test subjects. Two steps forward and one step backwards, or so the saying went. His initial twelve models were proof of that concept. Barely human in appearance. Incapable of accepting more than a handful of memories without mental bleeding. Prone to breaking down. Memory leakage.

"Perhaps darkness lingering from the replication procedure?"

Failures, every last one of them.

Given time, effort and multiple improvements, his creations could successfully hold a Keyblade wielder's memories without suffering catastrophic mental breakdown. An emergency contingency if the true Replica Program failed to achieve its long-awaited objectives. A legitimate concern given the propensity of Life Fibers to spontaneously adapt towards hostile environmental stimuli. He was close. If he'd focused exclusively on the standard models instead of his normal research, Xemnas could have a back-up puppet to do with as he pleased in a matter of months to a year at the longest.

But who would settle for an inferior project?

"What if it was something else -"

Platinum blonde hair lagged behind the rest of Vexen as he turned towards the computer, one eye slightly wider than the other, " - something less human, perhaps?"

The idea was brilliant.

And the ramifications equal parts disturbing and fascinating.

"Open images two thousand three hundred and fifteen through two thousand seven hundred and ninety-three."

As his command was accepted and processed, he tapped several keys, opening another program on a separate monitor. One specifically designed to assuage Xigbar's concerns. Every last trace of the parasite in the Chamber of Ruminations, down to the exact microgram, was accounted for. And another check reaffirmed his suspicions. Replica number thirteen had not come into contact with Life Fibers until entering the realm of darkness.

But how and when remained pertinent.

"Hmm," lingering briefly on an image showing his creation on a tropical world, the Heartless known as the Cloud of Darkness in the distance and the skies themselves grossly swollen with darkness-laden rainwater, Vexen swept an arm forward, "Interesting... but useless. Isolate any encounters involving physical contact between replica number thirteen and Ryuko Matoi."

It took ten seconds.

All in all, there were twenty-seven such images.

"Not good enough."

One picture, taken right before the surveillance tool was rendered inoperable, showed Ryuko Matoi and her allies - the stalwart king and someone he didn't recognize, both of whom wielded Keyblades - visibly reacting to his creation's mutating physical condition, "Contamination must have occurred prior."

The lack of answers irritated him.

"Open video thirteen dash seven dash beta," he rubbed his chin, green eyes focused on the obstinate truth remaining stubbornly just

out of reach.

Twenty-four attempts.

It had taken twenty-four attempts to achieve anything resembling success.

No. i, formerly known as Ryuko Matoi Replica Attempt Number Twenty-Four. Or Xion, as Xemnas had named his creation. His only success at replicating Ryuko Matoi with one hundred percent Life Fiber stability. Something no amount of analysis, data collection and observation could explain. He'd changed nothing... did nothing different... between numbers twenty-three and twenty-four. Yet the latter was stable with no signs of mental degradation apart from the *slight* personality variation compared with the master while the former instantly decayed into its composite Life Fibers.

"Isolate everything between replica number thirteen entering the realm of darkness and its encounter with Ryuko Matoi."

As anticipated, the video started upon replica number thirteen departing the Chamber of Ruminant. And an eyebrow arched. From a third-person perspective, watching his creation vow revenge only to promise to return with strawberry sea-salt ice cream - its favorite flavor - in the same breath was fascinating. And frustrating. Still, it was quite informative. Even describing something as insignificant as frozen treats provided quite the plethora of valuable data on perfecting the replication procedure.

Because the obstinate swordsman's favorite sea-salt ice cream flavor was chocolate, not strawberry.

"Hmm, nothing extraordinary so far," stroking his chin as the video continued playing at several times normal speed, Vexen observed purplish-black landscapes beneath twisted skies teeming with shadows blend into a mishmash of colors, "How bizarre. When could my creation have *possibly* encountered the -"

"Well... well... well..."

She emerged from writhing darkness already closing in her wake, strutting forward on heeled boots with confidence born of ignorance, green eyes playfully narrowing above a bright smile. Her voice was sickeningly sweet, almost saccharine, possessing mischievousness and maliciousness underneath the thinnest veneer of innocence, "So... *this* is where you created Xemnas's new favorite pet."

Vexen generally made an effort to tolerate his fellow Nobody, even if their collective intellect was inferior to his. Even the smartest geniuses needed to socialize with the rabble. But everyone had their limits. His breaking point was someone whose obscene personality and temperament were slightly *less* vulgar than Ryuko Matoi's. It was a remarkable insignificant point of similarity. One Axel pointed out. And Xigbar and Demyx repeated. Yet the woman's sardonic repartee and protean spite ensured she took the insult as a genuine compliment.

"I don't have time for this."

More concerned with replica number thirteen's encounter with the parasites, Vexen scoffed, "Leave before I inform Lord Xemnas of your insubordination."

"Aw, come on -"

Folding one arm over the other as she sauntered towards the mad scientist, Larxene playfully laughed, "Can't a girl visit a friend?"

"We're not friends," Vexen *disliked* the Organization's second-newest member. She was insubordinate, sadistic and quite possibly sociopathic. It was mildly irritating. But worse? The blasphemous, foul-mouthed harpy poked and prodded his equipment like a wide-eyed child, disregarding every safety protocol to satiate her curiosity, "We're barely acquaintances."

"Oh, worried I might break something?"

Another titter, almost like twinkling glass but possessing an underlying hint of sarcastic amusement impossible to miss, whistled between Larxene's beaming lips as she brushed aside his implied death threat, "Don't worry. I'm not going to touch anything *too* important. Not unless you want me to."

It took considerable willpower for Vexen to not raise his voice, "Do not make me repeat myself!"

"Whatever," stroking her cheek, feigning sorrow, tendrils of pure electricity danced between her fingers as her sarcastic grin turned malicious. And she took a few steps. Just enough to convince the man she was leaving. Right before stopping mid-stride, looking over her shoulder and smiling, "You know, just between you and me, you've *really* let fame and fortune go to your thick head."

When Xemnas first introduced Xion - a replica of the *infamous* Ryuko Matoi, only one hundred percent loyal to the Organization - she hadn't really cared.

Because she hated brats. And kids. And babysitting them.

Most of all, she hated Demyx.

"One little compliment from Lord Xemnas and suddenly you're too important to speak with us lesser nobodies."

But then, just the other day, Marluxia overheard Xemnas and Saïx discussing their so-called fourteenth member. How they needed someone to watch Vexen's newest puppet because its Life Fibers were predictably unpredictable. If they weren't careful, it might not only become as powerful as Ryuko Matoi, but rebel against them. And *that* piqued her interest. She didn't know anything about Life Fibers. What imbecile came up with their name. Why their super scary boss considered them dangerous. Or even what they looked like. But she could put two and two together.

Life Fibers were über powerful.

Which meant if they could convince the toy to change sides, overthrowing the Organization would be that much easier.

"But if you want *my* opinion -"

Matching the academic's wrinkled grimace with a mischievous smile, Larxene drawled out every syllable before impishly pressed a hand against her forehead, " - your little toy simply isn't worth the coat on its back."

"What!?"

As expected, that comment got the nerd's undivided attention, "Aw, does the truth hurt?"

Orange-red light from the unnerving machinery behind the rows of computers splashed across Larxene's face, dancing madly upon vividly green eyes and pale skin, as she sauntered towards the scientist, heels *clack-snapping* alongside soft tittering, "When I heard you *finally* cloned Ryuko after countless failures, I was almost ready to congratulate you. I expected something fun. Exciting. But your little puppet is nothing more than an imitation. A cheap knockoff of the real deal. It's way too bubbly and cheerful. Nothing like the *real* Ryuko."

"How dare you!"

"How dare I what? Give you some honest advice? I thought you scientist-types loved criticism," *laughing* at the academic, Larxene's smile widened, "But maybe you're too infatuated with Ryuko Matoi to see past your nose."

The chilly academic seethed at the abhorrent insinuation, "You little -"

"Humph! And who are you to interfere with my mission?"

That was replica number thirteen's voice.

"A friend of a friend, neither here nor there, but pretty much everywhere!"

But try as he might, Vexen couldn't recognize the second person.

"Who is that?"

Standing slightly to his right, Larxene muttered something beneath her breath. Witty repartee. Or perhaps a sardonic comment dealing with the situation. Whatever the case, Vexen ignoring the sadistic savage nymph. He didn't know who was speaking to his creation. But he could make inferences. There was a measure of saccharine sweetness. Childish curiosity and inherent playfulness concealed darker emotions. The voice sounded distinctively feminine. A woman or teenager nearing adulthood, perhaps. Or a creature of darkness stealing the guise of a woman. He would not know, not without additional data.

"Hmm," no longer interested in Larxene's atrocious commentary, Vexen's fingers blurred across the keyboard, "There's too much inference... but let's see if I can - ah, there it is."

Once again, the savage nymph whispered behind his back.

And for the second time, he ignored her.

Interference from the realm of darkness might have weakened the signal, but he was no slouch. Obnoxious static exploded across the monitors. The laughter scattered, warbled and reversed, returned and broke up. The picture randomly cut in and out. A loud whine reverberated off the Chamber of Ruminations' walls. Brief glimpses of pink and white and yellow flashed on the screens. But soon enough, perhaps after an entire minute of awkward silence worsened by Larxene's insistence on standing as close to him as physically possible, he'd managed to bring the voice's owner into crystal clear focus.

"Huh - a woman."

"Yes," Vexen rolled his eyes at Larxene's 'brilliant' observation, "How very observant of you."

Blonde hair fell down her back in voluminous curls, bouncing slightly with every bob of her head. A ruffled pink and white skirt, matching hooded jacket and boots, plus a blue shirt bearing a logo he could not quite make out, implied she was someone who followed the latest trends with unholy passion. Nothing too interesting. At least, not without pouring through the data. But there was something unnerving about her grin. Perhaps he was tired. He *had* been working almost twenty-four hours, ensuring No. 1's Life Fibers weren't showing any signs of rejecting Sora's memories.

But the woman perched atop a fluorescent purplish-blue crystal, one leg propped over the other and head tilting slightly to the right, seemed to be smiling just a *little* too widely.

"An ally of Ryuko? No," Vexen stroked his chin, "There's nothing to suggest Ryuko knows this woman. But who is she? And why does it feel as if I have seen her before?"

"Oops!"

Unimpressed by the 'revelation' gripping the academic's mind or someone ruining her fun just when things were getting interesting, Larxene wiggled her finger before pressing a button, resuming the paused video much to the 'higher ranked' Nobody's chagrin, "What? I thought you wanted to see who this -"

"I go wherever I want to go, and no one can stop me."

The unidentified woman giggled.

But her saccharine laughter wasn't why Larxene devolved into vulgar obscenities, "What the fuck?"

He would not admit as much, least of all to the savage nymph, but he agreed with her profane outburst. This was quite the surprising

development. One he hadn't expected. Because as the woman's head bobbed left and right while her neck and shoulders remained unmoving, her right arm, once tucked behind her back and out of focus, appeared, visibly displaying the severed forearm she'd been concealing.

"Oh ho! How interesting!"

To someone possessing limited intellect, such as Larxene or most members of the Organization, a severed limb was nauseating. But he knew the truth. He recognized the orange-red light radiating from tattered flesh. Caught between a mixture of excitement at a theory finally being proven and conclusive evidence Ryuko Matoi was but one of many, Vexen's smile faltered, "Another Life Fiber creature? Yes, of course. That explains how she's holding Ryuko Matoi's right forearm."

Larxene said something, but too interested in the woman, Vexen ignored the foul-tempered witch.

"I should've known they'd send someone after me!"

An audible sheen accompanied replica number thirteen summoning inferior versions of Gilgamesh's legendary collection.

"Now, which sword should I stain with your blood?"

Instead of recoiling at the obvious bluff, the woman leaned forward, not a strand of lustrous blonde hair out of place as she mockingly pressed Ryuko's forearm against her cheek.

"Oh, please!"

Despite the dread arising from old memories, none of which involved encountering anyone resembling the abhorrent woman looming over replica number thirteen, Vexen's analytical mind continued working unabated. He was a scientist. Emotions were nothing more than memories. Echoes to be studied, quantified and catalogued. Nothing

more. Intimately aware of Larxene's uncharacteristic silence at something far more sadistic than anything she could possibly pull off, he stepped backwards, arms folded and finger tapping his cheek.

"As if you're ~that~ important!"

Vexen did not know *when* the woman moved. Perhaps when he'd been typing. Or blinked. But she was now standing on the ground, close enough to replica number thirteen he could see every detail. Flawless features. Unblemished skin. Not a simple pimple or scar. Voluminous blonde curls possessing unnatural luster. A perfectly framed face, as if sculpted not by nature, but by an artist. Yt it was her eyes which drew his attention. They were the brightest shade of blue, ringed by strange grooves he'd seen only twice before.

On Ryuko Matoi.

And Xion.

"I'm just here to clean up ~her~ mess."

Another saccharine titter pierced his eardrums.

"I mean, golly, if I'm not careful, someone really stupid might try something ~super~ taboo!"

To his disapproval, Ryuko Matoi's forearm unraveled into Life Fibers, which quickly vanished into the woman's skin.

"There! All done!"

The woman wiggled her fingers, crimson light sparkling between the perfectly manicured digits, before smiling once again.

"But ~you're~ not done, are you? Why don't you show me what you got, huh?"

Perhaps his programming required debugging. Or he'd underestimated replica number thirteen's quality. Or there was more

of the encounter he'd missed. Whatever the underlying motivation, his creation vaulted onto its feet and leapt into action. Meticulously crafted replicas of legendary weapons stolen from across the worlds swung at the woman. Darkness trailed behind their edges, throwing torrents of power towards the woman. But it was like fighting the wind itself. She did not so much as move around his creation's attacks but step into the space between spaces.

She was frighteningly fast.

"Tsubame Gaeshi!"

Even caught point-blank by his creation's attack, Vexen swallowed the abrupt cough building in the back of his throat when the woman *flipped* around the technique.

"Hmm, I know they say, 'out with the old and in with the new,' but you're not exactly breaking any new ground, love!"

She was mocking replica number thirteen.

No.

She was mocking *him*.

"Bah! I'm not afraid of you!"

Vexen did not know 'how' or why.'

His mind sought answers yet came up empty.

"Oh, but you ~should~ be!"

But he knew one thing - his creation's bravado twisted the woman's smile. It didn't change. Nothing about her expression changed. But the malice always lurking beneath the surface became *that* much obvious.

"It's a shame you're ~a lot~ weaker than the original. He, at least, would have been fun to fight!"

Replica number thirteen turned around to see the woman standing behind it.

"Oh, well! That's what one gets using subpar knockoffs. No fun and endless disappointment!"

On the screen, replica number thirteen tried retreating only for the monstrous woman to wiggle her fingers, catching his creation in a tightening net of Life Fibers.

"Leaving so soon?"

The ground crunched underneath the woman's boots as darkness, oozing with monstrous viscosity, poured from her heart.

"And after coming all this way to see me? How rude! Didn't anyone teach you manners?"

An eldritch purple light bathed the woman's grinning features in twisted shadows.

"But don't you worry. Once I'm finished remaking your heart from the dress patterns on up, you won't want to go ~anywhere~!"

Vexen couldn't look away.

Not even if he desired to do so.

While he'd documented Ryuko Matoi's ability to freely manipulate the Life Fibers composing her body, this woman's skills far exceeded the callous master's by at least several orders of magnitude. His eyes and ears focused on the monitor. Every neuron in his brain processed the new information as quickly as possible. If the woman spoke the truth, it was possible for Life Fibers to remake not merely the body - with disastrous and fatal consequences - but the heart as well. Something he'd long theorized yet never proved. He honestly

no longer cared about replica number thirteen. Nor its horrendous fate.

To have encountered another amalgamation of Life Fibers, one distinct from Ryuko Matoi, within the realm of darkness supplanted its benign reconnaissance mission.

"As for you - "

Nothing about her voice changed.

It remained as peppy and saccharine as ever.

"I hope you're enjoying the show, shithead."

But when the woman's maddened eyes stared directing into the camera, his physical heart lurched.

"Because when I find you, what I have planned for ~you~ will make everything I'm about to do to this imitation looked like a walk in the park. Au revoir!"

There was silence.

Utter silence as the video dissolved into static.

"She - " taking a moment to catch his breath, Vexen rubbed his chin, " - might be a problem."

Author's Note

And thus, it's demonstrated that despite loving Ryuko with every fiber of her being, Nui is a goddamn monster. Nothing's changed. She hasn't had a heel-face turn. She hasn't turned over a new leaf. She hasn't seen the errors of her ways, convinced by Ryuko or someone else that humanity is truly worth the effort. No. She still views humanity as insects. She is, for all intents and purposes, a sociopath. Of course, she has matured. She doesn't go out of her way to kill humans. Not unless they annoy her. Or really piss her off. Or get in her way.

Also, Nui doesn't curse. It's a choice, mind you. She finds vulgarity demeaning of a proper woman. It's most likely learned behavior from Ragyo Kiryuin. However, she has a temper. A well-known temper. And prior to her return, temper or not, she didn't curse in the slightest. But now that her heart's connected to Ryuko's, when she gets angry - and I mean, exceptionally angry - some of her sister's vernacular slips through the cracks.

Last edited: Feb 16, 2020

Chapter 17.4

Note: This is a direct continuation of Chapter 17.3.

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/9/99/Kill-3-36-matoi.jpg/revision/latest?cb=20150413043008>]

Suddenly, everything made perfect sense.

But before she could give voice and life to the uncountable number of vulgarities bubbling in the depths of her heart, some of which were never meant to see the light of day, Mickey and Aqua haphazardly landed on the water, the latter nearly speechless by the horrifying abomination whose breath had recently caressed her face, "What... what is that thing?"

Once again, Mickey didn't know anything.

"I'm not certain, Aqua," years of studying some of the esoteric, obscure and quite possibly some of the most dangerous mysteries across the worlds had prepared him for confronting monsters of all shapes and sizes. Every world had secrets, which wasn't necessary a bad thing. Some were good. Some were horrible. And some were never meant to see the light of day. Yet there was something unsettled about *this* particular monster. The more he focused on the formidable darkness causing his ears to lightly twitch, the more he grew convinced they were, for some inexplicable reason, about to fight Ryuko, "But stay on your guard! No telling what this thing can do!"

"I *knew* she went down too easy!"

No longer focused on the past but what she needed to do to protect the present and future, Ryuko reached for the other half of the Rending Scissors - which she'd grabbed from the spot above her mantle at the last second on a whim - and yanked it off her neck.

"Mickey. Aqua. Keep looking for that door," with a snap of her wrist, the miniaturized blade expanded until it matched the one in her right hand, "I've got some shit to deal with. And it might take a while."

"Are you..." Aqua struggled to speak, words forming and dissipating on the tip of her tongue, "... are you suggesting you *fought* something like this before?"

"Not exactly," rotating her shoulder back and forth, side to side, working out kinks in the muscles, Ryuko decided to skip the build-up and move straight to the important question on everybody's minds, "This thing ain't a Heartless. Or anything you're used to! Hell, I've never seen anything like it! But don't get cocky - it might look like someone stitched a couple of monsters together and called it a day, but it's still freaking dangerous!"

Mickey's brow furrowed in the familiar way suggesting he was trying to piece together mystery with only half the pieces, "How dangerous?"

A strand of black hair painted crimson along one side tickled Ryuko's nose. Whatever the backstory, this *thing* was nothing more than a half-ass copy of Gilgamesh stuffed to the brim with Life Fibers. A fucked-up joke to screw with her emotions. And she didn't *doubt* Nui Harime could pull it off. Because if Hououmaru could make knockoffs of Honnouji Academy's top assholes with nothing more than a box of scraps and a misguided desire for revenge, the Grand Couturier could do the same in her sleep.

"It's complicated," a shake of her head scattered the confusing thoughts, "But magic won't work on this thing. And unless you can take it down hard and fast, it's going to get back up!. One wrong move and - "

The last few words caught in her throat.

" - look, the point is, I can take whatever nonsense this thing can dish," cutting herself off and adjusting mid-sentence, Ryuko bit the

inside her cheek. There was a burst of pain. Blood spilled across her tongue, leaving everything tasting vaguely of coppery metal. But the distraction cleared her mind. And spitting between her feet while swinging the Rending Scissors towards the monster still picking its ass off the ground helped clear her mind even more, "You and Aqua find that door! I'll catch up once I'm done! No arguing!

"But, Ryuko - " and, of course, as expected, Mickey, since he was one of her best friends and concerned about everything, opened his mouth.

"I get what you're saying. And I appreciate your concern," grinning even if it didn't quite look right in the darkness, Ryuko chuckled underneath her breath. She knew Mickey. The guy probably thought she was going to do something extra crazy, like sacrifice herself to take down the monster or risk everything on a secret move equally likely to break every bone in her body. Or stain her heart with darkness. Or all of the above, "But you don't have to worry about me. I know *exactly* what I'm doing."

Vermilion danced upon the Rending Scissors like petals caught in the afternoon sunlight as her grin turned vicious, "Trust me - taking down this bastard is going to be a piece of cake."

"Are you - alright, if that's what you want to do, Ryuko."

Mickey nodded before glancing at the almost identical blades in her hands, "But if you don't mind me asking - your scissors. They were created to protect people from monsters like this, weren't they? This thing - it's from your world, isn't it?"

Images flashed through Ryuko's heart.

Some faded around the edges.

Yet others clear as crystal.

"Yeah," her mouth twisted into a scowl when the misshapen abomination crashed through the island, scattering rocks and foliage in its wake, "It is."

Sliding one foot across the water, toes curling inside the boots, fading traces of sunlight from the horizon at their backs reflected off the Rending Scissors, Ryuko hissed between her teeth and waited. And waited. And waited. But nothing happened. Which pissed her off. The abomination once resembling Gilgamesh lumbered on limbs too awkward and disjointed for proper bipedal movement. It tried. But with arms possessing too many joints and fingers, one leg longer than the other and a spine more like a concept rather than letters, it kept falling over itself before face-planting in the sand.

It looked freaking pathetic.

But she didn't lower her guard.

Not when it came to Nui Harime.

Because the crazy bitch didn't do anything half-assed.

"Come on," seething when Aqua and Mickey stuck around, Ryuko ignored the droplet of sweat tickling the tip of her nose, " - what are you waiting for? Get out of here before it -"

"RRRAAAAGGGGGHHHHH!!!!"

As if flipping a switch, the bastard stopped pretending it could barely shamle, let alone walk. Claws carved deep gashes into the beach, scooping up massive tidal waves of sand and splintered wood. Blood spurted from its neck, shoulders and every inch of its body, boiling into deep red steam. It roared. It screamed at the top of its lungs. A sound akin to a tortured animal's dying breath assaulted their hearts and ears. Convulsing muscles shifted while bones broken and settled. And with one final screech, it erupted forward, covering almost half of the distance before any of them could so much as blink.

At the current angle, it was impossible to hit the damn thing with the Rending Scissors.

But that didn't stop her from trying.

In a burst of light and darkness and something lurking between, she intercepted the outstretched claws before they reached Aqua or Mickey. It might have nearly broken both of her wrists. Her head snapped forward before muscles yanked everything together. And her knees momentarily buckled as her left heel left the water's surface. But holding steady, Scissor Blades grinding against mutated flesh and bone before reaching what looked like pieces of the Genji Armor, Ryuko halted the monstrosity dead in its freaking tracks.

"GET... OUT... OF... HERE!!!"

As darkness condensed into the form of liquid shadows fell into her coat with an acidic hiss, never burning through the fabric but filling her nose with the smell of something seriously overcooked, Ryuko gnashed her teeth and forced herself against common sense. She took a lesson out of Satsuki's book - leaning backwards, waiting a second and planting her knee into the underside of the monster's chin, shattering several fangs and sending it bouncing towards the beach.

"AND DON'T WAIT FOR ME!!!"

With a recovery speed Satsuki would call 'modest,' she blurred into motion, skating upon turbulent streams of light and leaving Mickey and Aqua to do what needed to be done.

In hindsight, working together might have worked.

Or not.

Mickey and Aqua were strong enough to take down this thing without her help. They knew how to fight. And when it was better not to. But neither of them knew anything about Life Fibers. Nobody knew about

Life Fibers. And for a damn good reason. She trusted Mickey. She trusted Beatrix, Yen Sid and Steiner. Yet there would always be somebody - a narcissistic asshole or mad scientist - who'd see the alien parasites as their ticket to taking over the universe or Kingdom Hearts. How, she didn't know. It didn't make sense. But if something as normal as sense meant anything, there wouldn't be anyone trying to use Life Fibers as some bullshit crutch to make up for their own inadequacies.

"Time to end this!"

Dashing across the turbulent ocean as the creature recovered its balanced, misshapen limbs grasping solidified handfuls of darkness-tainted water, and lurched forward, meeting her blades with a fang-filled maw and blood-curling screams, Ryuko didn't wait until the last possible moment to do something. She pushed off the ocean, one leg leading the other, and leapt straight into the air. Leaning backwards, spine bent nearly in half and feathery hair whipping in the violent wind accompanying the powerful light radiating from her illuminating heart, she swung as hard as possible.

One blade arcing right to left.

The other slicing left to right.

"SEN'I -"

CLANG!!!

As the Rending Scissors wrestled against the unyielding wall of muscle and Life Fibers, caught between corded armor resembling the Genji Armor in the most twisted fashion, droplets of water hovered in the darkness, kept aloft by her seething rage. She was drenched. Water dripped down her face. Her hair lay matted against her forehead, dousing the underlying crimson admittance. Kaleidoscopic light mixed alongside burning darkness as the ocean vibrated underneath the monstrous conflagration of vermilion energy

seeking escape through the only means possible - outwards and upwards and in a massive explosion.

"I ain't got time - "

Pushing even harder, sweat and water giving her face a reflective sheen, light overwhelmed darkness as the Rending Scissors moved forward an inch. Then another inch. Then another inch, slowly yet steadily gouging through distended muscles and releasing torrents of nearly boiling blood.

"... FOR YOUR BULLSHIT!!!"

Adjusting her grip, tightening her fingers and *dragging* the Rending Scissors downwards with all the force she could muster, Ryuko attempted to slice off a couple of its arms. It should have worked. But only one of the Scissor Blades carved deep enough to expose the Life Fibers lurking underneath the nauseating surface. The other one missed. And that was enough for the bastard's wound to regenerate, leaving it good as new, pissed to high hell and ready for revenge. Which she avoided by flipping backwards, hair brushing against the steaming ocean, landing in a kneeling crouch and immediately rushing back into the fray.

"NOW, SEN'I -"

She'd noticed something seriously *wrong* at the last second.

Too late to stop.

But not too late to watch.

Something resembling darkness erupted from the monster's heart. She said 'something' because it didn't feel like darkness. Not like a Heartless. Or Unversed. Or Maleficent's personal brand of evil. It was different... and familiar in ways that made her skin crawl. And in that moment shorter than an eternity but no longer than the time required for multiple conflicting signals to travel the distance between

her eyes and brain, Scissor Blades inches from ending the fight, reddish-orange light impossible to mistake as anything but what she knew it to be, tainted by actual darkness smelling vaguely of wet dog rolling in week-old shit, pulsed around the convulsing Life Fiber abomination.

There was an explosion.

A searing light.

Pain like she'd been sunbathing too long.

And her head colliding with something exceptionally sturdy.

"Ow..."

It took a moment for her brain to reboot. And a little longer for the spots to stop dancing in front of her eyes. A rock roughly the same size as her foot bounced off her shoulder, rolled down her stomach and plopped into the sea with a mocking splash. Buried halfway into the small island right off the coast, Ryuko grimaced. Winced. Spat. And cursed. Not necessarily in that particular order, "Okay, should've expected that."

Another cough cleared the dust from her lungs. No question about it - Nui Harime put a lot of 'love and care' into making this monster. And pulling the 'horrific transformation' cliché right before she could get any answers out of it? Only a sociopath like the former Grand Couturier of Revocs would come up with that kind of bullshit. But a magical nuke? She thought the bastard would pull off one of Gilgamesh's secret moves. Like boasting about being the 'greatest something or another' before jumping into the air, stabbing a blade or six into the ground and unleashing explosions of darkness and magic and whatever else he could come up with.

Not a goddamn nuke.

Reaching towards the crater's opening, fingers scrapping against jagged rocks until finding something large enough to grab, a paopu fruit bounced off her head, which only served to worsen her mood, "Ugh... gonna kill that crazy bitch!"

She'd bet a million gil Nui Harime was watching from the sidelines.

Which begged the question - what was the bitch's game? Revenge for taking down Ragyo? Not a chance. When it came to Nui, things were never that simple. From what Satsuki told her about the Grand Couturier *before* she went all psycho on her ass, Nui was a meticulous to a freaking fault. Nothing that freak did - sewing clothes, designing shit or planning what to murder someone with - was straightforward. Like those life-like puppets she'd used to trick Mako. Or that nearly foolproof disguise. Shit like that took time. Lots of time. Time Nui could have saved by murdering her ass.

But how the hell did the crazy bitch know where to find her?

There was something missing. A clue. A piece of the puzzle. Something to make sense of the nonsense staring her in the face. She hadn't told *anyone* where she was going! Hell, diving head-first into the realm of darkness hadn't been her plan until tracking down Gilgamesh, beating the living crap out of an entire gang of sniveling bandits and realizing Mickey needed help. So, unless the psychopath had been following her from the beginning, there was no freaking way Nui could have possibly known she was inside the -

"God-fucking-damn it!"

If not for the Rending Scissors currently occupying her hands, Ryuko would have slapped herself, "I'm going to *double-kill* that bitch!"

Satsuki always told her 'Ryuko, learning another language would be extraordinarily helpful when breaking the barriers separating worlds.' But *no*, she had to be a complete bitch and refuse to learn how to speak French. Oh, she could read it. And write it. But speaking the language? Not a chance. It's why she'd thought his name had been

a play on how he copied people. The guy was a mimic. Gogo meant 'Decoy' in French. One thing led to another. There wasn't anything suspicious about a self-proclaimed mimic calling himself Gogo. Especially if he came from one of the worlds that spoke the stupid language.

When she tracked down Nui Harime, she was going to *triple-kill* the bitch.

A metallic bitterness clung to her mouth. She didn't know what Nui Harime had planned. Or why the blonde sociopath would not only announce to the world, loud and clear, she was alive, but hand-deliver a gift-wrapped Life Fiber *thing* straight to her doorstep. There were too many questions. No answers. Her patience was hanging by a thread getting thinner by the second and she had the strangest feeling something was missing. An important piece of the puzzle that would tie everything together. But questions about the blonde sociopath's motivations for anything was second on her 'shit to do' list.

The first?

Finish disassembling her early birthday present.

"Alright," fueled by adrenaline, frustration and sheer annoyance, Ryuko's eyebrow spasmed when one of the Rending Scissors didn't budge. A problem fixed, easily and with excessive violence, by yanking it out of the wall, sending rocks and debris raining into the sea, "I don't know where she dug up enough Life Fibers to create something as half-assed as you -"

The abomination that once looked like Gilgamesh breathed.

Or coughed.

Or did something close enough to breathing.

Guttural wheezes and strained gasps punctured the darkness enveloping the remaining islands. Its shoulders rose and fell as spittle hotter than boiling water dripped from its jagged fangs. Muscles twitched. Every now and then, as its yellow eyes stared hard enough that she was certain it was looking at something underneath the skin, blood gushed from various parts of its misshapen body, staining both the ocean as well as sickly green flesh contained within the shattered remains of armor different shades of reds. The bastard was about the same size as the average Darkside.

And twice as ugly.

"- but if she thinks something like *you* is enough to bring me down," blood trickled down her forehead, dribbling past her nose and lips before dropping from her chin as she removed herself from the crater, "She must have brain damage."

It was fast.

But *she* was faster.

A smirk pulled upon Ryuko's lips as she leapt over the charging monster, one boot finding purchase on its forehead. What happened next was too quick for the average person's eyes to track. There was an audible shimmer so quick it could hardly have said to have existed in the first place. She flipped forward, skating through the darkness on paths of light before landing on the beach. First her right foot, which slammed heel-first into the sand. Then her left foot, which nearly snapped sideways after landing awkwardly.

And then a Scissor Blade when she almost lost her balance.

"Nice try," pushing the near embarrassment to the furthest corner of her mind and then burying it forever, something whispered into her heart. But not using words. It didn't use any language - spoken, written or otherwise. It was like someone plucking random strings on a guitar. Or playing the piano with three sets of fingers and twice as

many hands. But thanks to the lumbering monstrosity screaming at the top of its lungs - whether out of pain from losing an arm or frustration because *she* didn't lose an arm or both - she was finding it very difficult to hear anything, "But it's time I ended -"

"GRRRAAAWWGGGGHHH!!!"

Instinctively covering her ears, she had little time to prepare before the concussive wave smashed against the island.

"Gah!"

Brought down to one knee by the sheer *loudness* assaulting her heart, she felt something pop. And then something else pop. And then something warm trickle out of her ears, down her cheeks and drip onto her shoulders.

"God damn it!"

Ignoring the blood oozing from her broken eardrums, Ryuko collapsed to the ground, hands covering her ears. Ugh, it was almost like Jakuzure's stupid encore. No, it was worse than old-fashioned music. Struggling to look anywhere but the sand vibrating between her feet, she stabbed a Scissor Blade into the ground, forced herself to open her eyes and physically glared at the twitching limbs, dripping blood and gnashing teeth screaming its goddamn head off, ""Why the hell is it so -"

That's when she saw it.

"What the -"

Her eyes widened, pupils shrinking to pinpoints, " - the fuck is that?"

She didn't know how it was possible. And perhaps that explained why the monster's screaming suddenly vanished into the background like yesterday's garbage. Above them... above the already corrupted islands... the sky was shattering into pieces.

Cracks spread across the night sky, infecting everything. But the heavens shattering like glass wasn't why her breath froze in her lungs. Or why her heart skipped an actual beat. Because behind the curtain where parts of the sky already fell to the ocean? There was something there. Something very familiar.

Something that jogged a memory from the deepest depths of her heart.

"Jeez. That you're the only person who can snip this world off. That's what!"

"I don't know what bullshit you're trying."

A snarl dislodged the confusing remnant of a half-formed memory she couldn't remember. Metal ground against metal as she forced herself off the ground, Rending Scissors grinding against one another, "But like hell will I LET YOU PULL IT OFF!!!"

Water heated to a near boil splashed around her boots.

Blue eyes tinged by a faint maroon locked with sickening yellow.

Reality inverted itself as she flipped, turning upside-down with light streaming from her heart.

For what felt like an eternity, she floated in the darkness, one leg trailing behind the other, the Scissor Blade in her left hand leading the one in her right hand, feathery bangs brushing against the ocean's boiling surface and teeth bared in an animalistic snarl. Her fingers tightened. Her knuckled blanched white underneath black gloves. A hint of her wrists appeared as her sleeves rustled and fluttered. She could feel her skin crackling. It hurt to breathe. Every mouthful of air was like sucking in the sun.

Then she swung.

And everything suddenly faded away.

"SEN'I SOSHITSU!!!"

A gentle ripple radiated from her knee as she landed atop the water behind the monster, Rending Scissors held outwards, face burnt yet otherwise fine. To the naked eye, she swung twice - once with each blade. Staring at her reflection in the ocean, skin heal to normal on the wavering surface, Ryuko's mouth twitched as dozens upon dozens of vibrant vermilion lines appeared on the Life Fiber monstrosity, misshapen claws reaching towards where she'd been floating moments prior and grotesque mouth hanging open in a silent screech. As she caught her breath, something almost like fabric tearing... or someone taking a pair of tailor scissors to a sheet of cloth... assaulted her heart.

It wasn't a noise or sound or anything along those lines.

"What was..."

Several hundred pounds of muscle, armor and death unraveled into barely enough Life Fibers to fill a bucket. Alien threads exploded over the ocean like a dandelion. But Ryuko could not find the energy to care. Not even when those same threads froze mid-fall, changed directions and streamed into her hair, momentarily brightening the crimson undertone woven between navy blue and dark black feathery bangs.

"I bet you never really put your life on the line in battle before... have you!"

"These memories... those words..." heart pounding heavily against her chest, Ryuko bit the inside of her cheek, "I don't remember any of them. Why can't I remember any of them?"

Like old memories rising to the surface out of nowhere, clear as the moment they happened, Ryuko found herself remembering bits and pieces of different things she goddamn knew never happened. Bulldozing through the entire Elite Four only for Ragyo Kiryuin to appear out of nowhere instead of Nui Harime. Her and Satsuki

standing on top of Honnouji Academy and staring down an enormous Life Fiber doll. Slicing off Nui's arms during Satsuki's stupid school event. Junketsu having a super form like Senketsu. It was like trying to remember a dream. Every time she reached out, grasping for something or another, images and sounds slipped through her fingers.

It was annoying as hell.

"The flow of time is being compressed according to her will!"

"Uuuuuggggghh - "

Tilting her head backwards, blinking as the weird phenomenon over the Destiny Islands reversed course, cracks fading while new chunks of sky replaced the pieces that had fallen to the ground, she closed her eyes, groaned from the depths of her chest and began the comparatively short trek to the beach. Something was screwing with her mind. Because nothing was making sense. No matter how *real* the memories felt, they had to be fake. She never got her rematch against Sanageyama or fought Satsuki during her stupid ceremony. And she sure as shit never asked Nui Harime for personal advice on getting stronger.

"Not only is that bitch still alive, I'm goin' nuts," as one of the Scissor Blades bounced off her shoulder, she refrained from pinching the bridge of her nose, "This can't get any worse."

It started with a few drops.

Then a downpour.

Until finally a deluge of water blanketed the shattered world.

"Haaaaahhhh..."

Completely and utterly *done* with the realm of darkness, which could burn for all she cared, she pulled her hood over her head, slouched

forward and sighed, "Me and my big mouth."

Re:Mind [Mémoires: Corsaire]

Re:Mind [Mémoires: Corsaire]

["You want information - "](#)

He was alone on the docks. Well, not alone, per say, there were ships filled with pirates, one of which he'd been attempting to commandeer, but alone with his thoughts, which was a close yet not comforting approximation. Licking his lips, the confused man raised a finger, reconsidered, raised four fingers and then promptly lowered them. Looking lengthwise in either direction, frowning inquisitively and then chancing a peek over the docks into the murky depths, he eventually cleared his throat.

" - from me?"

It sounded like a question. But it wasn't a question. And he should know. He was quite skilled at phrasing demands in the form of a question, which tended to confuse potential allies and enemies alike. Somewhere overhead, a seagull cawed. Followed by an albatross and several drunkards futilely throwing empty bottles at said birds. Carefully maneuvering around the woman, he slowly backed away.

"Don't even try," the short-tempered woman who'd cornered him on the docks after he'd given her the slip in Tortuga reached out and grabbed his wrist, squeezing with the force of a metal vice, "I need information. And you're the guy everybody said to ask - Jack Sparrow."

"It's *Captain* Jack Sparrow," even as he reflexively corrected the woman's improper usage of his title, Jack Sparrow found himself at a loss for words. An unsettling phenomenon since he usually strung together sentences and excuses in his sleep. But something about this particular woman rendered him speechless. At least, quieter

than normal. Which left his heart feeling rather empty and unfulfilled, "Now, if you could kindly let... go..."

He tried freeing himself from her grasp.

Failed.

Struggled a little harder.

Then winced when the woman tightened her grip, as if to drive home the point, before letting go, "Now, are you ready to start talkin'?"

"Very well," rubbing his sore wrist, which was miraculously unbroken, he took a long and careful step away from the woman, "As the price for any all information I might or might not know, which might or might not leave you disappointed, you shall bring me the *Black Pearl*."

Confusion flashed in the woman's peculiar eyes, "The black what?"

"The *Black Pearl*," he repeated, "Fastest ship in the Caribbean," he paused again, "My ship?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Then I must humbly yet insistently refuse your request for assistance," wary of any magical shenanigans - curses, hexes, powerful voodoo that turned his body inside out or something equally nasty - Jack circled around the woman on a rather circuitous path "No purchase, no pay. Such is the life of a pirate, lass."

Something flipped through the air.

And instinctively, he reached out and caught it.

Holding the gold coin in his fingers, dirt and assorted nastiness staining tanned skin, *Captain* Jack Sparrow once again found himself at a loss for words. Which was growing increasingly annoying.

The coin had *weight*. Not the heaviness of normal gold, which most people assumed wasn't particular heavy. Not until you tried outrunning half a dozen guards while carrying a small box. And then you realized how much a couple hundred gold coins truly weighed. But this? This coin, emblazoned with coats-of-arms and symbols lacking context and meaning even to a worldly man such as himself, was different. He'd say magical. But it was truly more like mysterious. Or ominous. It was speaking to him. And he was quite certain if the woman's expression wasn't firmly set on anger or annoyance, he would have spoken back to it.

"It really does exist," it wasn't cursed like the Aztec gold his treasonous first mate stole alongside the Black Pearl. But the coin was still extraordinarily special, "*Nunca Nunca...*"

"Huh?"

Panic swelled inside his chest, "Oh, um, err... Hold on a second, lass!"

His worst fears were realized - he'd blurted out the truth. The gold coin truly was cursed. But having carefully positioned himself on the other side of several crates, which would fall between them should the woman choose to do something he'd undoubtedly find unwanted, Jack reached into his pocket, pulled out a peculiar compass, *tapped* it for good measure and frowned.

The needle was spinning.

And no matter which direction he faced - east, north, west or south - it didn't stop spinning in circles, "Come... on..."

"Guess you don't know anything - "

It was almost supernatural. One moment the coin was in his hand. Between his fingers, as a matter of fact. And the next, the woman was sauntering into town, said gold coin bouncing against her

thumb. He would've been upset if he hadn't immediately panicked, "Maybe someone in town can -"

"Wait!"

Her tone might have been frighteningly condescending, almost as if she'd practiced talking down to people, but he was a pirate. And as a pirate, he had priorities, some of which went against the code. Snapping the compass shut, tucking it away inside his coat and stumbling awkwardly, he hurried after the mysterious woman, one arm pointed upwards, "You have me at something of a crossroad! I'm open to negotiations on the price! Gold! A ship! Manners! Err... booze! I'll even throw in Gibbs! Just tell me how you traveled to *Nunca Nunca!*"

"I didn't."

The point-blank refusal threw him off-balance, "Of course you did, lass. That coin," his fingers twitched at the gold glittering in her hand, "Proves otherwise."

"The guy I'm looking for? He's the one who went there," the unnamed but exceptionally dangerous woman's strange eyes narrowed in such a way that he instinctively drew back his hand before she tore off his fingers, "His name's James Hook, captain or something or whatever. What do you know about him?"

"Ah... nothing really," nonchalantly shrugging before reaching into a nearby barrel, grabbing a piece of fruit and biting into said apple, Jack Sparrow offered one to the woman, whose refusal only served to make him feel better, "Made port about... err... six months ago. Shot the first pirate he saw. Still owes me twenty shillings, that man does."

Someplace, somewhere, fate was playing a cruel trick on his heart.

"Hold on -" the apple fell from his fingers, dropping onto the dock and rolling over the edge into the water as everything suddenly made

sense. The captain's familiarity with his usual methods of bluffing. How he knew when to call or not in Liar's Dice. And his knowledge of the compass, " - that was *James*?"

"You know him?"

"Know him? We served on the *Wicked Wench* before he went off and joined Blackbeard," the sheer absurdity baffled Jack Sparrow. Hook? That wasn't James's last name. It was... well, he couldn't quite remember at the moment. Nevertheless, Blackbeard's former boatswain was infamous across the seven seas as the only member of the Queen Anne's Revenge to leave the notorious pirate's service and live to tell the tale, "Which means he owes me fifty shillings. No, wait, sixty. Let's just say seventy shillings."

The woman's hair shimmered in the sunlight as she folded her arms, something he'd thought impossible until this very moment, "Where is he?"

"That, I'm afraid, I can't tell you, lass," the creaks and groans of Tortuga - men and women fighting, pistols either hitting their targets or missing and hitting someone else, cantankerous cheers and shouts from every bar, brothel and alley - retreated, if only momentarily, "As a captain and pirate, it is forbidden for me to tell anyone not a captain about another captain without said captain giving permission to the first captain. If word gets out, I'd be strung up from the docks before sunrise."

"You tried pickpocketing me *and* coping a feel," the woman's eye twitched, never a good sign, "You're lucky I don't kill you myself!"

"Err... fair enough, but in my defense, I was looking for your money, any and all touching was completely accidental," slightly sweating, probably from the sun beating on his neck, Jack quickly added, "In that case, I suppose stealing James's ship, absconding with the legendary treasure of *Nunca Nunca* and potentially embarrassing Blackbeard will do for now. Savvy?"

"Deal," the woman said, flipping the coin through the air.

"Now then, if you'll excuse me, I must return to my previous actions - stealing that ship," dropping the gold coin in his pocket, and then double-checking for good measure the woman hadn't taken it back, he sauntered down the dock, passing ship after ship before settling upon one particularly empty and unguarded one, "If I recall correctly, which I do, the captain of this ship is lying in a pool of his own blood somewhere in town."

A disbelieving snort was the woman's' response, "*You* shot him?"

"Of course not," grabbing a rope, Jack hauled himself onto the empty deck, one boot planted on the railing and another on top of a weathered barrel, "I just happened to be walking in the street when some nefarious criminals shot the man in cold blood. And then helpfully pointed the captain's crew in the direction of his cold-blooded murderers. But not before warning the crew of said murderers about the murdered captain's crew seeking revenge. Thus, leading to the entirety of Tortuga devolving into civil war and allowing me to steal this ship."

358/2 Days [VOLUME No. I]

358/2 Days [VOLUME No. I]

Entry 1 [Day 7]: Who am I?

My name is Xion.

But that's not really ~my~ name.

At least, I don't think it is. Which is a problem. Because I can't remember anything. Nothing. Nada. Not a thing. Who was I? What was my name? Do I have a family? Friends? Do they miss me? Did I have dreams before the Heartless stole my heart? Did I go to school? Was I popular? Did I have a crush? I don't know. And it's embarrassing, but if he hadn't been sitting next to my bed when I woke up, I'd probably have run outside and screamed really loud.

Oh, his name is Axel.

I don't know who he is, but if he's telling the truth, and he doesn't look like the kind of person who can lie with a straight face, he saved me from the Heartless. I still can't remember a single thing, but Axel says he found me wandering some world ~way~ across the realm of light. When I told him I couldn't remember anything, he seemed bothered? Upset? Or maybe sad. He thinks the trauma of losing my heart must've given me amnesia. That's why I can't remember anything. Not even my name.

And I'm something called a Nobody.

... whatever that is.

Entry 2 [Day 7]: Thanks?

I thanked Axel for saving me.

With a smile, of course.

He seemed... upset.

Maybe I wasn't smiling enough?

Entry 3 [Day 7]: Appearances

My eyes are strange.

And my hair's really weird.

Entry 4 [Day 8]: Bad Dream

Last night I dreamt I was hurdling through the stars towards this weird world. Everything was hot. I was burning up. There was someone else. Someone important. I was holding onto them, shouting their name with all my heart. I cried. I screamed. I begged them not to leave. But they wouldn't listen to me. They told me to move on. That I needed to move on. Then they were gone. And I was alone, tears streaming down my face only to sizzle away in the intense heat.

Was this a memory?

Did this happen to me?

I don't know.

Thinking about it makes me feel sad, so I'm going to try and not think about it anymore.

Entry 5 [Day 8]: New Friends

Today I was formally inducted - I think that's the right word - into the Organization. But I wasn't alone. There was another new member. Roxas and, well, he's a little weird. But really nice. He smiled when I asked if he wanted to be friends. Anyway, since we were introduced in alphabetical order, Roxas is number thirteen while I'm number

fourteen. Xemnas - err, I mean Lord Xemnas - said this was a momentous day for the Organization. Me and Roxas are special because we have something called the Keyblade. And we're supposed to use these Keyblades to gather hearts.

Which is nice, I guess.

But what's a Keyblade?

And why did the one-eyed dork (why did I just call him that?) sitting next to Lord Xemnas never stop staring at me?

Entry 6 [Day 8]: Not a Friend

I don't think Larxene likes me very much.

Or anyone.

Demyx says she's a witch who devour Nobodies who don't follow Lord Xemnas. Xigbar muttered something about women being too complicated. Axel made a strange expression with his finger only for Saïx to smack him upside the head. Luxord said Larxene was like an ill-tempered wind. And Xaldin said Larxene had more than a few screws loose. But what did I do wrong? I only asked if she wanted to be my friend. Since we're the only two girls in the Organization, we have to stick together, right? But Larxene demanded to know why I was acting so peppy and happy.

After she stormed out of the room, Zexion gave me a box lunch (a present for joining the Organization) and said some worlds have wildly different customs.

Maybe Larxene comes from a world where nothing smiles.

Or I accidentally said something super insulting.

I should go apologize.

Entry 7 [Day 8]: Apologies

I tried apologizing.

It didn't work.

Entry 8 [Day 9]: Another Apology

I tried apologizing again.

Larxene threatened to electrocute me if I ever walked into her room again.

Entry 9 [Day 9]: A Compliment

Roxas spoke to me.

Well, it wasn't so much speaking as a few words. Or maybe a mumble? Uh... grumble? It doesn't matter! He complimented my hair!

I take it back - my hair isn't weird at all!

Entry 10 [Day 10]: Keyblade Training

Today was my first day of training. I'm supposed to instinctively know how to use a Keyblade. But what is a Keyblade? Axel says the Keyblade is a special weapon capable of gathering hearts. Just whack a Heartless with a Keyblade and 'poof, out comes a heart! It sounds really simple, right? Well, he couldn't show me because he doesn't have a Keyblade. Only special people - um, Nobodies - have Keyblades. Which means out of the entire Organization, Roxas and I are the only ones who can fulfill Lord Xemnas's mission.

Only there's a slight problem.

I don't know what's wrong with me. Roxas makes it look so easy (and his Keyblade looks so cool) but I don't know how to summon my own Keyblade. Maybe I'm nervous. Or trying too hard. It's annoying! I ~know~ I have a Keyblade. Why else would Lord Xemnas go through all the trouble of giving me a new name? But

something's preventing me from using it. I can't quite explain it. It's like... like... like someone's holding the door closed from the other side. I know what's inside the room. I just can't get to it.

Entry 11 [Day 10]: Tough Luck

Since I had so much trouble figuring out how to bring out my Keyblade, Axel decided to take me into the city below the castle for some super special training.

That's where I saw my first Heartless.

It was different than expected. I thought Heartless were ferocious monsters. With fangs and claws and wings. It was almost cute. Right until it tried attacking me. But Axel said I wasn't leaving. He told me to survive until I figured out why I was having trouble bringing out my Keyblade. And then use my Keyblade to destroy the Heartless.

That mean old... grr!

How do I summon something when I don't know if I even have it? Everybody says I have a Keyblade. But I don't remember having it.

I don't remember anything!

Entry 12 [Day 10]: A Punch

I panicked.

One moment the Heartless was waddling across the street and the next? Well, was shouting. Or saying something. I couldn't hear over the fire. And the Heartless was reaching towards my chest. A lot happened. I can't remember much. But without really thinking about it, I did the first thing that came to mind.

I screamed really, really loud and punched the Heartless.

Really hard.

Maybe... too hard?

Entry 13 [Day 11]: Watching

I saw Roxas again today.

Larxene took him to Twilight Town to learn how to use magic. I think he'll be fine. He's really smart. And he has a Keyblade. I just hope Larxene doesn't do anything too mean. She can be such a... a... what was that word Demyx used? A witch? No, that's not right. Whatever! Roxas is my friend! We had lunch together today. I told him all about my super special training with Axel.

He said I'll learn how to swing a Keyblade in no time!

For some reason, hearing him say that made me really happy.

Entry 14 [Day 11]: A Test

Axel must've told Lexaeus about my training. Because the ginormous Nobody (who gave me a puzzle) asked that I follow him. And I did. Right back to the city, where Axel, Vexen, Saïx and even Xigbar were waiting for us. I didn't know punching a Heartless was so special. But they thought it was. They wanted me to do it again. They wanted to see how strong I really was. But instead of punching another Heartless or one of the Dusks wriggling around the castle, Saïx ordered me to punch Lexaeus.

Entry 15 [Day 11]: I Feel Horrible

I feel horrible.

Axel says it wasn't my fault. Orders were orders. As a member of the Organization, I had to follow my orders no matter what they were. But that doesn't make it right. Lexaeus is one of my friends. I should've held back! Instead of his Lexaeus's axe-sword as hard as possible, just like Saïx said, I should've pretended not being so strong. But now his arm's broken and Xigbar's muttering something

under his breath and Vexen's taking notes and Saïx is smiling and the whole world is falling apart around me!

Why am I so strong?

Was my human self some sort of monster!?

Entry 16 [Day 11]: Magic is Useful

Zexion fixed Lexaeus's arm with magic.

It's good as new.

Magic sure is useful.

Entry 17 [Day 11] A Different Apology

I apologized to Lexaeus, but he blamed himself.

He also gave me another puzzle.

Entry 18 [Day 12]: Boredom

I'm bored.

Lord Xemnas says I'm not allowed to leave the castle without his permission. He says it's because I'm still adjusting to my new existence as a Nobody. But why does Roxas get to go on missions? Is it because I'm too strong? I guess they have a point. Lexaeus is one of the strongest people I know. And I ~still~ sent him flying through a building. But it's not fair! So what if I'm super strong! I can be useful like everyone else! Xigbar teleports out of the castle whenever Saïx tries to get him to attend missions. I've even seen Xaldin fly out through a window to avoid doing missions!

But hanging around the castle all day means I've made a new friend!

Demyx is nice, not like Larxene or Xigbar or Marluxia. He's really good at playing his guitar. Or was it a sitar? I don't remember. I

wonder if he used to be some sort of musician.

Maybe I should ask him.

Entry 19 [Day 13]: School?

I had another dream.

It was early in the morning. I was standing in a cable car, half-asleep. There was another girl next to me. She was snoring in my ear. It sounded loud. In front of us, looming high enough to reach the clouds, was a building. It looked like a castle. Or a giant robot. Someone else was talking to me. I couldn't see him, but he soothing voice whispered into my ear like an old friend. He asked if I studied for the history test. I told him everything would be fine. He didn't seem to like my answer.

Was this another one of my memories?

Did I go to a school that awesome?

Entry 20 [Day 13]: More Training

Today I'm training alongside Axel and Roxas!

Entry 21 [Day 13]: Fire isn't so bad

Since I still don't know how to summon my Keyblade, Axel asked if I wanted to learn how to use magic. Everybody has a specialty. Larxene is good with lightning. Vexen likes ice. Demyx uses water. Axel has fire. I don't know what Marluxia uses. Flowers, maybe? Wait. How can flowers be magic? Are they magical flowers? Can he use them to make sentient trees that fight for him? I asked him about this. I think that was the first time I heard Larxene laugh. But Marluxia didn't seem too happy to hear it, so I'm not going to ask again.

But Roxas is good with all sorts of magic!

As for me?

Fire isn't so bad.

Entry 22 [Day 13]: It's salty and sweet

Because we trained so hard today, Axel gave me and Roxas ice cream.

It was salty... but sweet, too. I really liked it.

Entry 23 [Day 14]: Alone

Axel had to leave today on some secret mission.

Everybody's gone, except for Roxas. Oh, and Demyx, but he's taking a nap somewhere.

Entry 24 [Day 15]: Technically...

Since nearly everybody was out of the castle, Roxas decided to help me learn how to summon my Keyblade. It was a secret, of course. Saïx said I'm not allowed to train without someone around. But Roxas is someone. So technically it wasn't breaking the rules if he helped me, right?

Entry 25 [Day 15]: Not My Fault!

Good news! I finally learned how to summon a Keyblade!

Bad news! I might have 'accidentally' made a new door in the Grey Area.

Entry 26 [Day 16]: Why a Pig?

I had another dream last night.

I was sitting on a desk listening to a sweaty guy talking about something involving Europe (what a strange word!). Next to me,

smiling in a really weird fashion, was a woman with the biggest eyebrows I've ever seen! They looked like fuzzy caterpillars! And her hair was silver like Lord Xemnas's but shone like a rainbow! I don't remember what she said. But whatever it was, it made me smile, which means it had to be nice, right?

She also called the man a pig in something or another, which wasn't so nice.

But why a pig?

Chapter 17.5

It was like running through fog.

She couldn't see shit.

"Come on!" Ryuko raced through the darkness, hood pulled over her face and Threadcutter swinging back and forth, "Where the hell are they!?"

When her heart led her to the half-opened door behind the waterfall, she'd been prepared for anything. Like running into Mickey and Aqua. Or an irritating-as-shit fight against some random asshole preaching the power of darkness. Or standard, run-of-the-mill Heartless. Or a massive hand yanking her deeper into the darkness. Or hell, a backdoor to the realm of light.

Not darkness so thick she could cut it with her Keyblade.

"UGH!!!"

Frustration simmered within Ryuko's heart. Damn it, time couldn't be *that* screwed up inside the realm of darkness. A minute was a minute. And she'd only wasted a couple of minutes stripping Nui Harime's latest attempt at pissing her off to its basic components. Aqua and Mickey couldn't have gotten too far. She had to be close. Just a little further. But what if she went the wrong way? Was she trapped inside this stupid place, forced to fight Heartless until someone stumbled across her years - centuries - down the road?

"Damn it, what the hell am I thinkin'?" licking her lips and coughing, Ryuko shook her head, forcing the disturbing thought to the deepest corner of her mind. She was alone, surrounded by darkness. There was nothing as far as the eye could see. She was a single flickering light in an endless expanse of shadows stretching back to the foundations of the universe. And yet Ryuko pushed forward, placing

one foot in front of the other, light shimmering from Threadcutter,
"Just gotta keep moving! I'll catch up sooner or -"

Her face smashed against something particularly sturdy and well-built.

The *whack* echoed throughout the darkness as her nose shattering, sending torrents of blood gushing down her chin.

Somewhere, at some point, Threadcutter bounced across the unseen ground, spiraling out of her fingers into the surrounding darkness. But blinded by searing pain, crimson dripping onto her new coat and spots dancing before her eyes, Ryuko experienced the unfortunate side-effect of momentum. Her head snapped backwards. Her arms flailed. Her upper body momentarily moved opposite her legs. Her mind blanked. And before she knew what hit her - or who hit her - she collapsed onto her ass, shoulders slamming onto the ground with a painful *crunch*.

"Son of a - "

Grabbing her broken nose with one hand, Ryuko rolled sideways, leapt onto her feet and looked around, " - *motherfucker!*"

The pain quickly plateaued, then subsided and faded entirely, leaving her standing in the darkness, blood gushing from her nose and severely pissed to hell. God damn it! That freaking hurt! She didn't know who sucker punched her, but it was going to take a lot more than a lucky punch to take her down. They might be strong. But nothing - and she meant goddamn nothing - in the universe was going to stand in her way. Not a Heartless. Not some asshole! Not even herself!

"Raaaggghh!"

A visceral scream furiously ripped out of Ryuko's throat as she reached out, clenched her fingers and summoned Threadcutter from

wherever it had landed, "I don't care who or what you are, I'm gonna beat your freaking ass - "

She stopped mid-promise and stared... and stared... and *stared*.

It was a door.

Ryuko blinked, rubbed her eyes and looked again.

The door was still there.

Threadcutter slipped between her fingers alongside most of her anger, frustration and darker emotions, "You've got to be kidding me."

Something exceedingly wet dripped in the far-off background as she tilted her head slightly to the left. Then to the right. Drawn towards something she couldn't quite put into proper words - or hell, explain with all the time in the day - Ryuko reached towards the door, thought twice about doing something moronic, drew her arm back before cautiously poking it with Threadcutter.

It was solid as a rock.

"Alright," eyebrows nowhere near as thick as Satsuki's furrowed into a quizzical frown when the door proved one hundred percent real, "It's a door."

Scratching her cheek, Ryuko stepped backwards. It was just a door. One fancier than the door in the cave behind the waterfall. But still just a door. Nothing more, nothing less. Yet it wasn't just a door. It was both a door and not a door. Ugh, thinking about it gave her headache. She was confused as shit. But the more she thought about it, the more it made perfect sense. Unlike the other one, this door seemed... heavier. Realer. Almost as if it existed way longer than she'd cared to possibly imagine. It wasn't the Door to Darkness. She wasn't that damn lucky.

Rusted, or maybe rustic, metal standing somewhere between ominous dark cherry and foreboding burnt amber loomed nearly three times her height, so roughly one Gamagori. The sides steeped into a sharp peak at the top, drawing her attention from the distinct lack of any handle. It looked warm. It felt warm. And while she couldn't hear anyone - at least, not words as they made normal sense - Ryuko swore up and down someone or something was whispering on the other side of it.

In essence - it looked sketchy as fuck.

Propping Threadcutter atop her shoulder, she tapped one foot against the ground, eyebrow twitching at the phenomenal darkness oozing from the door, "Welp, it's a trap."

She didn't need to be a genius to realize something was seriously messed up. A door? By itself? Hidden so deep inside the darkness nobody but nobody would stumble across it unless they were looking for it? Yeah, it was a trap. But Ryuko paused in the middle of her triumphant realization. Her lips pursed into a befuddled frown. And she started thinking. *Had* she been looking for this door? Her heart was her guiding key. And as much as it didn't make any sense, her heart had led her through that other door into this darkness. And now it was telling her to walk through the door.

"Ugh, this place is screwing with me," snorting the trickle of blood up her nose, she stepped backwards to clear her head and think.

Did Mickey and Aqua come through this door?

If they did, why wasn't it already open?

And knowing Mickey, why hadn't he come back at the last minute to help?

"Oh, screw it," the muscles in her shoulders popped as Ryuko swung Threadcutter forward, elbow locking into place. This was probably a nightmarish trap. A bad one. But even so, it couldn't possibly

compare to anything the realm of darkness already threw her way. Powerful Heartless. The Cloud of Darkness. A Life Fiber monstrosity gift-wrapped and sent straight to her doorstep by Nui Harime. There was literally nothing left that could genuinely surprise her, "I've got too much shit to do and people to save!"

Only nothing happened.

"What the -"

As the impossible happened, Ryuko's mind forcibly rebooted itself. She blinked, mouth agape, looking at her Keyblade, then the door, then back to her Keyblade, before immediately redoubling her efforts. A beam of bright red light verging on orange and yellow connected Threadcutter with the door, dispelling the darkness writhing its way up her legs. She could hear a noise that wasn't quite a noise. She could feel the warmth of her heart manifested into reality. Her hair rustled and swayed alongside her clothes. But like the first time, nothing happened.

Her Keyblade, which could open pretty much anything in the realm of light, including several things that didn't quite fit the definition of being 'locked,' couldn't unlock *this* door.

"YOU! GOD! DAMN! PIECE! OF! RUSTED! BULLSHIT!"

Thoroughly annoyed to the point she lost all self-control, Ryuko shifted from magical to standard means of opening a stubborn as hell door. First by punching it, which left her knuckles bruised and bleeding. Then stepped back, taking a deep breath and kicking it. Which felt amazing until she hobbled backwards, pain radiating up her leg and more than enough curses to earn Beatrix's disapproval and Steiner's infamous shell-shocked expression spewing from her mouth.

"GAAAAAAH!!! DAMN IT!!!"

Rubbing her knee, the pain quickly settled into modest irritation. Threadcutter disintegrating into motes of crimson and gold between her fingers as her anger reached its penultimate climax, Ryuko threw her entire weight against the door, "OPEN YOU STUPID...."

CREEEEEAAAAAKKKK!!!!

"Come... on..." shoulder firmly propped against where she thought the handle would be, strained fingers pressed flat next to her elbow and boots scrapping for purchase on the oozing darkness, she gasped. Curses dribbled from her lips like spittle. Her teeth clenched together. Something in her chest *snapped*, fixed itself, snapped again and then fixed itself another time. The door was freaking heavy, like it was carved from adamantite or orichalcum. It had to weigh two tons. It *looked* like it weighed three tons, "... almost... got... it..."

It took time.

But she slowly yet steadily forced the door open, each inch harder than the last.

And as she did so, darkness rushed through the widening cracks. The purplish-black miasma slapped her face. It seeped into her pores, bypassing whatever magical protections were woven into her clothes. The influx of darkness forced Ryuko to catch her breath, sucking heaping mouthfuls of bitter and disgusting darkness into her lungs. But no matter how terrible the darkness made her heart feel - and it felt worse than lying to Mako about how great her 'new special sauce' tasted- she buckled down and pushed twice as hard.

Eventually, the door opened.

Letting her see the truth awaiting within the deepest abyss of the realm of darkness.

"So, you came all this way to see me."

"Shut the hell up!"

"Or what? You'll fight me?"

"You're damn right!"

The memories returned with a subtlety of a sledgehammer. She remembered everything. Every last detail. Even the stuff she'd forgotten or shoved to the back of her mind - the pouring rain, Unversed wandering through the countryside around her mom's house, that masked psychopath gloating about the darkness and Heartless squeezing their way into the Keyhole where that ball of yarn had hidden itself from the world for longer than she cared to imagine.

A melodic twinkling on the bitter wind, bringing to mind rusted windchimes, accompanied the hiss whistling between Ryuko's teeth as the door leading from the darkness into a room far worse disintegrated, "Guess *something* had to survive."

This was the Thread Palace.

Or whatever screwed-up name Satsuki claimed their ancestors had 'bestowed upon' the room long before Ragyo Kiryuin came into the picture. Their family's greatest secret. It looked exactly how she remembered, give or take a few random changes. It was dilapidated. Ruined. A shitstorm of rubble. The giant hole in the roof caused by the Original Life Fiber leaving was still there. But the floor was intact. And the overwhelming sense of 'ominous' was replaced by emptiness, as if something important had been stripped away.

It was almost as if she'd stepped backwards in time.

"Tch," this wasn't the past. This wasn't her memories. This was the realm of darkness, "But did it have to be *this* place?"

The question echoed several times off the thousands of empty alcoves stretching around the abandoned Thread Palace until it was nothing more than a hushed whisper. Her footsteps reverberated with a distinct hollowness, each *snap-clack* of her heeled boots against bare rock reaching the furthest shadows. As much as it really pissed her off, knowing someplace like the Thread Palace survived the darkness meant other, far more important places were out there. Mako's house. Their school. The park she and Mako hung out on the weekends when it wasn't too cold.

"Ugh, gotta stay focused," pushing aside the nostalgia, Ryuko shook her head, forcibly dislodging the hood and scattering water across her face, "Alright, now, where's the -"

They emerged before she finished.

Some skittered across the floor. Others floated through the darkness. Still more stamped over the walls, twitching like cockroaches. Some had razor-sharp claws designed to tear out hearts. Others wielded scalloped blue blades. Some looked like giant puffballs. And others, the stronger ones, mimicked the barest facsimile of humanity. In seconds, countless yellow eyes flickered through what remained of her home. Through quantity, they attempted to achieve what they could never pull off with quality.

And with a broad swing, Threadcutter reduced dozens of Heartless to nothing but fading shadows.

"Not this time!"

Her fist, bereft of Keyblade and Scissor Blade, smashed into another unfortunate Heartless with enough force to concave its mouthless face.

Yet she was only getting started.

More Heartless spilled from the shadows. Dozens. Hundreds. In a matter of seconds, Ryuko found herself surrounded. There was no

escape. No way out. She was outnumbered. Then she *breathed*. Time slowed until it barely moved as she counted each and every beat of her heart. Reaching into the depths of her own existence with both eyes open, she embraced the brilliant light lurking within. Almost like a switch, the world suddenly came into focus. She saw everything. Heard everything. *Felt* everything. Her expression softened. Caught by a phantasmal breeze swirling around her person and nowhere else, her shoulder-length hair glowed brighter than normal. A hint of maroon entered her eyes.

With well-trained expertise, practice and more than her fair share of grace, she leaned forward, shoulders twisted slightly more clockwise than the rest of her body.

Threadcutter *shone*.

She took a single step.

And promptly vanished.

"BLITZ ACE!!!"

It was over before the Heartless knew what happened.

Afterimages swarmed the Thread Palace, fading remnants of where she'd sliced an unaware Heartless before moving to the next. And the next. And the next. She moved faster than the darkness. Her body... her existence... her heart itself became pure crimson and golden light. She was nothing but a blur of relentless motion leaving innumerable Heartless seconds to contemplate their fate before falling apart. And by the time her feet touched the ground and stopped, sleeves rustling and breath slightly labored, Ryuko found herself completely alone.

"Great," stepping over a Heartless, claws twitching as its body dissolved, she propped Threadcutter atop her shoulder, "Nothing's changed."

It was just like eleven years ago.

Only this time, the Heartless *stayed* dead.

But as she walked across the recently refurbished Thread Palace, craters and burns marking where she'd been particularly vicious towards one or two or twelve Heartless, something popped Ryuko's head. Brows furrowing, lips puckered into a confused glower, her head snapped towards the alcoves lining the walls. Or rather, towards a very specific alcove. It was empty. No psychotic bastards ready to gloat about dragging her world into darkness. No Unversed waiting in the wings. Nothing. She was completely alone.

Which left her back at square one.

"If Satsuki was here - " cautiously lowering Threadcutter, but not dismissing the Keyblade, Ryuko circled around the room, staring at each of the cracks leading to perhaps something good. Or something pointlessly horrible and stupid, " - where would she say to go?"

She already knew the answer.

Even inside darkness thick enough to cut with her Keyblade, she could feel Mickey and Aqua's light.

They weren't close... but they weren't particularly far either.

"Alright!"

Pearlescent light tinted crimson and gold enveloped Threadcutter as she spun the Keyblade between her fingers, tossed it overhead, caught it and pointed it towards the only possible way out of the Thread Palace, "Time to - huh?"

She heard it long before they arrived.

A strange noise almost like somebody tossed a bucket of nuts and bolts into the dryer and set the damn thing on max for shits and

giggles.

"What the hell?" Ryuko jumped before the words finished leaving her mouth. Hundreds upon hundreds of Heartless, beady yellow eyes and razor-sharp claws grabbing each other in a macabre dance of death and disaster, exploded from one of the many cracks lining the walls. They swarmed around each other in a giant column, moving not as individual creatures but as one enormous pain in the ass heading straight towards her.

"Ugh! Give me a freaking break!" thoroughly unimpressed, she flipped Threadcutter into a reverse grip, white-hot flames streaming between its teeth, "I don't have time for - "

Her heart skipped a beat.

She blinked, refusing to believe what she was seeing was real. But it was real. It was happening. And someone she'd known for almost a third of her life was desperately fleeing the giant swarm of Heartless, "God damn shit!"

Chapter 18.1

"Hah... hah... hah..."

He ran through the swirling darkness, sweat pouring down his face and lungs burning.

"Damn it," his memories were blurs of sounds, images and emotions. He remembered everything. But the events were jumbled. Misplaced. Out of order. As if his heart couldn't figure out what happened. Or didn't want to remember, "Come on..."

Desperation pressed against his heart. It would have been easy to give up. To stop running, close his eyes and accept the darkness once and for all. It would probably be painless. But he didn't. He couldn't. Not until making everything right. He'd made too many mistakes... hurt too many of his friends and people who had nothing to do with his problems... to simply give himself over to the darkness. Chewing on the inside of his lip, he kept running, forcing his newly regained body to press onward.

"Sora... Kairi... hang on..."

Countless numbers of the weakest variety of Heartless, imp-like shadows he could have slain with his eyes closed, flooded the passageway behind him. They'd appeared without any warning, exploding from nothingness almost as soon as he found himself whole once more. Gritting his teeth when part of the tidal wave crashed into the ground next to him, sending chunks of rock exploding through the surrounding darkness, Riku begged his body to move faster, "... I'll find a... way out of... this!"

Time passed.

Seconds... minutes... hours... he couldn't tell.

"There!" but something almost like *hope* blossomed within his heart when a flicker of red and orange light appeared on the horizon.

Riku didn't consider *what* lied beyond the darkness. Only that it was better than dealing with the Heartless growing closer and closer by the second. Gasping for breath, heart pounding inside his chest and arms swinging back and forth as if doing so made him run faster, he quickened his pace. He pushed himself harder. He widened his lead. And without stopping to rest, he burst through the light, sneakers momentarily slipping on polished stone upon entering an entirely unfamiliar room.

"GET DOWN!!!"

On instinct, he threw himself to the ground.

Hands tucked against the back of his head, one knee throbbing from landing harshly, Riku glimpsed a silhouetted figure out of the corner of his eye, light streaming around a familiar red and gold sword, "R-Ryuko!?"

Ryuko didn't hear him.

Or rather, she was too busy screaming.

"RRRAAAAAAAGGGGHHHH!!!"

Her fingers tightened around Threadcutter. Her gloves crackled under the pressure. Her sleeves and hood fluttered. Carried upon gusts of crimson magic and currents of gold, she kicked off platforms of nothingness at the last second, spun upside-down with knees bent and back arched into a curve. Keyblade raised overhead, eyes shimmering with shades of maroon and blue, Ryuko listened to the *thump-thump* of her heart against her chest, stiffened her spine, took a deep breath and *swung*.

"STOCK BREAK!!!"

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 18 - Light Your Heart Up

It was over before it began.

In mere moments, the point-blank cataclysm decimated the innumerable Heartless scraping and clawing and grasping at any traces of her light. An unmovable object clashed against the unstoppable force. And then lost. Reality collapsed. Space warped and buckled until shattering in an apocalyptic explosion. Starting at Threadcutter, surging through the Heartless and climaxing somewhere beyond sight, light overwhelmed darkness. Red, orange and gold cascaded down her Keyblade's quilted teeth alongside visible white and sapphire. Nothing was left untouched.

Not the Heartless.

And not the Thread Palace as it experienced some emergency redecoration.

Which, if the hateful bitch was still kicking and screaming, Ragyo Kiryuin might've found annoying.

"Heh, too bad for her," hair whipping around her face, Ryuko half-grinned, half-wincing as rubble crashed through the resulting vacuum.

Rather than imagine her long-dead bitch of a mom's shocked expression upon seeing the Kiryuin's 'sacred chamber' defiled by someone who couldn't give a rat's ass about Life Fibers or clothing, she allowed gravity to pull her towards the approaching ground. Arms spread outwards and knees slightly bent, Ryuko flipped backwards, chuckled under her breath and landed next to Riku.

"Eh, sorry," Threadcutter bounced off the floor as part of the Thread Palace - at least two or three alcoves still attached to each other - crashed to the ground. But paying little if any attention to the ensuing

earthquake while absentmindedly raising a barrier, blocking the approaching salvo of debris and assorted stuff, Ryuko rubbed the back of her neck with some measure of embarrassment flushing through her veins, "Really should've held back a little - "

Her half-hearted apology faltered at Riku's zombie-like expression.

"Hey! Earth to Riku!" crouching next to the normally smug brat who'd bragged about exploring the worlds with his friends, ass touching her heels, head cocked sideways and Keyblade resting on her shoulder, Ryuko snapped her fingers in front of Riku's blank face, "The Heartless didn't steal your heart, did they?"

Her question must've turned on a switch inside Riku.

"R-Ryuko?" the silver haired teenager coughed out her name, "Is that... is that really you?"

"No, I'm Jecht," scoffing at the thought of that arrogant bastard doing anything *this* heroic, Ryuko reached down, offering Riku her hand, "Pfft, of course it's me."

Accepting Ryuko's offer, Riku stiffened when the woman's grip tightened, " Uh... is something wrong?"

"Oh, nothing really," Ryuko muttered the excuse under her breath as she released Riku. No mistaking it - darkness clung to the snot-nosed brat's heart. Yet contrary to Nui Harime's half-assed replica of Gilgamesh, Riku's darkness smelled... natural? Or something. How she could tell the difference between 'natural' and 'artificial' darkness gave her a migraine. But the kid rubbing his fingers because she squeezed them too hard was the real deal, not another dumb Life Fiber clone, "Just wonderin' what you're doing in a place like this."

"It's, uh," Riku wilted beneath the master's stern gaze, "It's a long story."

Her lips parted, as if to ask *why* it was a long story why he was running from Heartless inside the realm of darkness instead of growing up semi-normally on a world visited by someone without a sense of humor, multiple Keyblade masters, a former coliseum champion and retired asshole and Satsuki. But within seconds, common sense kicked into overdrive. Ryuko's eyebrow twitched several times in quick succession while something resembling a strangled gasp escaped her convulsing throat.

"Uuuggggghhhh - "

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Ryuko wished it was possible to die from embarrassment, something she knew impossible after years of Mako, "I'm a freaking idiot."

As the older woman metaphorically punched herself in the face, Riku blinked, "Master Ryuko...?"

"How many times do I have to tell you not to - " Ryuko instinctively began chastising Riku before catching herself, "Never mind. Just don't call me that again."

"Sorry," Riku glanced away, his voice devolving into a hushed whisper, "It's just that -"

"No. No. Stop. You don't need to explain anything," the weight of the world was a familiar burden. Not one she particularly liked. But one she knew. Scratching her cheek, which was difficult thanks to the gloves keeping away the darkness, Ryuko took a mental step backwards and took the opportunity to gather her emotions and thoughts before she said anything stupid or ridiculous, "I already know what happened."

The look in Riku's eyes caused something in her chest to clench, "You do?"

"The darkness took your world. And you blame yourself. You think you could have done something to save your friends. You go over

those last few moments tryin' to find something you could've done differently to save everyone," Ryuko's throat grew parched as she sought the words she'd hoped to never tell anyone. Words she'd been telling herself for so many years she'd literally stopped counting, "But that sort of thinking ain't healthy. Because what happened... whatever happened isn't your fault."

"Yes, it is."

Ryuko almost couldn't hear Riku. She didn't need to. Not when she could *feel* the conflict raging inside his heart, "No, it isn't."

"It was my fault," there was a pregnant pause as Riku clenched his fists and forced his point across, "If I hadn't listened to him and opened that door, everything would be alright."

Door?

For a split second, hardly long enough for the memory to surface before something stomped it down, Ryuko remembered the vaguest impression of a hooded figure with an annoying voice talking about a door. And a key. As desperately as she tried holding onto them, the memories slipped between her fingers like water, flowing faster and faster until she couldn't remember *why* she was pissed, just that something Riku said pissed her off.

"What was his name?" sounding more like Satsuki than she cared for, Ryuko's voice drew Riku out of his shell.

"Ansem," Riku ground his teeth as the man's taunting voice echoed in the deepest recesses of his heart, "His name... he told Sora his name was Ansem, He claimed that I could possess a Keyblade if I opened my heart to darkness," he forced the words through trembling teeth, "I wanted so much to be like you - strong powerful enough to protect my friends - that I deluded myself into believing everything Ansem told me."

"Tch! Ansem was full of it."

Riku winced, "... I know."

"No, not *that*," ignoring Riku's excuse, Ryuko rolled her tongue around her mouth, feeling every contour and groove, and scoffed. She was starting to *really* hate Ansem. And not just because the guy sounded like a grade-s psychopath. And *not* because this Ansem probably stole the real Ansem's name to cover his tracks, "The guy was lying. It doesn't matter how strong your heart is or how well you think you control the darkness. You *can't* just pick a Keyblade off the ground. Or find one lying in the street!"

"But Sora has a Keyblade," the silver haired teenager shivered, but not from the coldness.

"I don't care if Sora has *four* Keyblades! A Keyblade ain't like Excalibur," the master's tone shifted between annoyance and irritation before settling on some mixture of the two, "You say I'm strong and you'd be one thousand percent right. But I didn't get my Keyblade until after I started trainin' with Beatrix. And *she* didn't get her Keyblade until she -"

The remaining words slipped down Ryuko's throat.

"Wait - Sora has a Keyblade?" the question sounded ridiculous. Pure, horse-grade bullshit. Even *asking* such a stupid question made her feel like a moron, "How!?"

"Why aren't you angry?" Riku's heart quivered, "If I hadn't been so weak... if my heart had been stronger... maybe I could have -"

Something hard yet blunt collided with his shoulder.

"Enough!"

Ryuko didn't feel regret. Not for yelling at Riku. Or bashing Threadcutter into his shoulder hard enough to drive to the ground but not hard enough to break anything. Maybe it wasn't the best decision. Or the most mature. And didn't sit in the top ten choices

she could have made to resolve the situation. But it was the fastest, easiest and quickest way to force the point home. Especially on a severe time crunch where every second wasted listening to Riku's problems - important or otherwise - was time not spent saving the worlds.

"You're right about one thing - I am *upset*," her tone was steady. Strong. Emotionless in the same way someone's parent stopped emoting whenever they did something monumentally stupid. But that phase passed as quickly as it appeared. And following in its silent wake, *anger* flushed through her veins. Breathing through her nose, lower lip sucked into her mouth and toes curling inside her boots, Ryuko closed her eyes and counted to ten. And then counted to ten again when that didn't work. Because she was angry. Really angry. Angrier than she could remember being in quite some time.

The sort of anger that never helped.

"Just not at you, is all," not since figuring out Xehanort was the bastard who created Vanitas and sent the sociopath to her world had she felt anything remotely resembling the anger rushing throughout her body, "That doesn't mean *you're* off the hook!"

Before Riku had the opportunity to figure out what she meant, Ryuko grabbed the front of his shirt and yanked him off the ground, "Ansem or not, you screwed up!"

Ansem, Seeker of Darkness?

Ryuko jotted another item onto the mental list - save the universe, escape the realm of darkness, take a hot shower,, sleep, *then* hunt down the asshole calling himself Ansem.

"But stayin' angry won't solve anything," the staleness clinging to the air tasted vaguely of hopelessness. It passed through her teeth as easily as water down a river. Absentmindedly rustling her hair with the same hand used to drag Riku onto his feet, turning her disorganized and unkempt appearance even more disheveled than

usual, Ryuko chewed on the inner corners of her mouth, "Right now I want to hear how you plan on fixing things."

"Huh?" Riku couldn't believe he heard Ryuko suggest what she asked.

"You keep blaming yourself," half-turned away by this point in the conversation, Keyblade resting on the juncture of her shoulder and neck, light gently shimmering within the feathery folds of her hair, Ryuko repeated herself, "But instead of wasting time whining about your problems, why don't you start thinking about how you're gonna clean up your mess?"

The silver hair teenager flinched, "That's easier said than done."

"Which is why I'm gonna pass along some advice," Ryuko's voice, for whatever reason, noticeably tightened, "One of Satsuki's oh-so-helpful 'colloquialisms.'"

Most people couldn't get away with mocking Satsuki's weird habit of giving advice in the form of strange and weird sayings. But she wasn't most people. In fact, Ryuko was goddamn certain she was the only person - well, the only person besides Mako since nobody could get mad at Mako for anything - who could criticize Satsuki without ending up with her face shoved into the ground. And even then, it wasn't easy. It took a shit ton of practice. And knowing when to draw the line and retreat. Because for all her patience and maturity, Satsuki was fucking scary whenever someone managed to push her over the infinitely high wall.

"Don't ask. Because I have no idea where she comes up with half of her crap," Threadcutter danced around Ryuko's fingers in a flurry of crimson and amber before the swordswoman thrust her Keyblade into the ground, kicking up a hailstorm of pebbles that pelted both of them, "But it goes - those who lack resolve are incapable of wiping away their own tears."

Riku briefly thought he understood what Ryuko meant.

But when she turned around, strutting towards the doors across the room without saying another word, he realized the truth.

"I - " lacking direction, he fumbled over himself, mouth full of cotton and thoughts clouded by an impenetrable fog, " - I don't get it."

"Can't blame ya. Satsuki ain't exactly the best motivational speaker," half-involved in helping Riku and half-focused on finding Mickey, Aqua and *maybe* Gilgamesh, providing the guy hadn't fallen into an endless abyss of darkness at some point, Ryuko pressed her hand against the metal doors before instinctively pulling backwards.

The doors were warm.

Even through her gloves she could feel it.

"That's why I'm here - to translate her nonsense," shaking her fingers, heat still clinging to her hand, Ryuko grumbled, "It used to mean something stupid. But eventually, thanks to yours truly, Satsuki realized she had her head lodged so deep up her own ass she couldn't see anything."

As Ryuko chuckled to herself, Riku quietly added his two cents, "... I can't see Satsuki being anything like that."

"Oh, trust me, you have *no* idea how stuck-up Satsuki used to be," more annoyed than irritated at Riku for interrupting her mid-speech, Ryuko stepped away from the door, one hand propped against her waist and the other scratching the back of her neck, "Back to the point, Satsuki's little saying - " she rolled her tongue, " - these days means something completely different. And in a good way. Unless you muster the courage to accept your mistakes, nothing's every gonna change. You gotta wipe away your own tears! Take charge of your freaking life! Don't give excuses for your screw ups!"

"How," Riku mumbled before repeating himself.

"You've got friends, don't you? Sora... Kairi... Wakka..." Ryuko rapped her knuckles against one of the doors, aware of Riku's deepening depressing yet refusing to give a crap, "I couldn't have gotten this far without Mako and Senketsu. Saving my world... training until my teeth bled... beating the shit out of Satsuki..."

"Senketsu?" repeating the strange name, which clung to his heart with resounding tenacity, Riku's mind suddenly rebooted, "Hold on! You fought with Satsuki!?"

"What can I say? Things were really complicated," no matter how much Riku insisted otherwise, Ryuko didn't whine.

Which he thankfully didn't.

"Alright, ignoring Satsuki, there's another saying," hand pressed against the door, eyes half-lidded and heart pulsing gently inside her chest, Ryuko pushed through the thick darkness until twin pinpoints of light exploded into metaphysical existence. Mickey. Aqua. And more? There were four more lights further out. One familiar and three not-so-familiar. With her fingers curled against warm metal, breath barely visible in the chill permeating the realm of darkness, Ryuko waited a moment before looking over her shoulder, "May your heart be your guiding key."

"My..." Riku looked at his heart,"... guiding key?"

"Everybody always over complicates things. Think deeply... read this guy's diary... study this ancient battle... yadda, yadda, yadda," turning back around, hand waving overhead in a loud display of antipathy, Ryuko squeezed her fingers and summoned Threadcutter from across the Thread Palace in an explosion of twinkling ruby and mesmerizing crimson light, "Words are words. They can be anything you want them to be. The truth is, you just gotta trust in your heart. It might sometimes lead you astray. And you might get lost in the darkness. But it's your heart. And good and bad, light and darkness, what better way to know what to do than listening to it. I've gotten this far trusting my heart. And if I could make it, so can you."

Her Keyblade jingled as she propped it atop her shoulder and smirked, "That said - you still up for it?"

She knew Riku.

She'd known Riku since he was a snot-nosed brat playing mock hero versus villain on the beach with Sora.

"Pfft! Why am I even asking?" snapping Threadcutter towards the doors, Ryuko took careful aim, "It ain't like I'm gonna give you a choice!"

Born into existence by her passion, a beam of vermillion light shot from her Keyblade.

For a moment, it seemed to struggle against something.

Yet soon enough, there was a brilliant flash.

The light faded away.

And in its place, etched into existence by the master's power, a gateway in the shape of a stereotypical keyhole stood prominent upon rusted metal and darkness.

"Come on!" Ryuko didn't wait. She didn't stand around and listen to anything Riku had to say. Aqua and Mickey were in trouble. Not *immediate* trouble. Not Heartless or stupid villain trouble. But they needed her help. And she was going to give it to them, "We've got an entire universe to save and no time to lose!"

Last edited: Mar 24, 2020

Chapter 18.2

"PUSH!!!"

The grueling and, at times, terrifying battle against Ansem fading into the back of his heart, Sora threw himself against one of the doors, "I'm trying!"

Unable to muster enough stamina to cast so much as a basic fire spell, let alone argue with someone giving one hundred percent, Donald grimace, "PUSH HARDER!!!"

"Ugh... hah..." between grunts and gasps, the young Keyblade wielder's shoes slipped against the ground. Trembling fingers gripped the edges of the door, hoping to find a better way to push it closed. Yet defeating Ansem had taken too much out of him. Out of them. No matter how hard he pushed... no matter how much he *wanted* to close the doors and stop the darkness from flowing out... they didn't budge an inch, "I... can't..."

"Don't give up!"

A comforting voice scattered their despair as beyond the doors, emerging from the darkness threatening to overwhelm the worlds, another pair of hands, white bell-sleeves extending up lithe arms, appeared opposite Goofy's.

"Huh?" perplexed and confused, not as much as Goofy but more than Donald, the youngest Keyblade wielder peeked inside. He had questions. So many questions. Like who could be helping them. And why her voice sounded familiar, "Hey! You're - "

Sora managed to ask half of his question before Donald and Goofy simultaneously shouted, "MASTER AQUA!?"

"It's been a while," a breathless titter escaped Aqua's lips. For an ephemeral moment, hearing Donald and Goofy reminded her of

home, before the nightmare which tore everything apart brought Ryuko into their lives. Terra and Ven arguing over something stupid. Master Eraqus exasperated and seconds from casting Gravira to end their pointless argument. And herself standing nearby, mouth covered and trying not to laugh. Those halcyon days felt as if they happened yesterday, "But let's catch up after closing these doors, alright?"

Still confused yet willing to have faith, especially since he hadn't expected to meet someone like Aqua in an awful place like this, Sora nodded, "Right!"

But words didn't necessarily translate into strength.

Despite their combined efforts, the doors didn't budge.

Not so much as an inch.

["Muhahahaha!!!"](#)

A flamboyantly loud, obnoxiously overbearing and condescending voice more than full of themselves guffawed somewhere in the darkness. Amusement followed by a heavy *whump* as someone or something several times Sora, Donald, Goofy and Aqua's collective weight hit the ground running, armor clanking and clothes rustling. Flashes of blinding light caught Sora's attention alongside words he couldn't dare repeat.

All of which ended with one hand... then two... then six grabbing both doors from the inside, "As the hero of this story, it would be remiss for you to start without me!"

Aqua's heart hitched, more out of shock than relief, "Gilgamesh?"

"What? You were expecting Siegfried?" the swordsman backhandedly dismissed the question pertaining to his identity, "It'll take more than a sucker punch from an evil doppelgänger to take me out of the game!"

"Oh, brother - " squawking in a tone suggesting nothing but sheer annoyance, Donald rolled his eyes, " - how did a criminal like *you* get dragged into this?"

"Hm?" the high-pitched voice befuddled Gilgamesh. For some inexplicable reason, he swore he'd heard someone with those... well, not so dulcet... tones before. But where? And more importantly *when*? Intrigued by the cacophonous series of noises similar to nails against a chalkboard, he craned his head down, following the irritating sound to its unmistakable source beyond the massive doors - a sharply dressed duck without pants, "Uh... do I know you?"

"Know me!?"

Emerging as a tempestuous storm of unbridled raw emotions curtailed from evolving into a full-blown apocalypse by the actual apocalypse unfolding around them, Donald's feathers turned a rather nasty shade of red, "You're that no-good cowardly thief who tried breaking into the castle!"

"I'm no coward!" Gilgamesh counterargued before realizing what he'd admitted, "Oh... err..."

Despite the laws of physics and reality preventing such a thing from happening, Donald was inches from reaching through the doors and throttling Gilgamesh, "It was you!"

"Bah! I didn't say anything of the sort," throwing a pair of hands into the air, the swordsman huffed at the mallard's pointless attempt at wringing out a confession, "Enough expository banter about off-screen events! It's time to close these doors and -"

"COMING THROUGH!!!"

An outline of light pierced through the veil of darkness.

It happened too fast for the average eye to follow. Gilgamesh, of course, witnessed nearly everything. As did Aqua and Goofy. Sora

caught a glimpse of someone moving around and between Heartless. Donald, due to losing his foot in the subsequent rush of wind, blinked. But emerging from the corridor of light, Keyblade in hand, dressed nearly head to foot in a black coat, they carved a path of destruction through the unsuspecting Heartless lingering in the shadows with little more effort than it took to brush one's teeth in the morning. Gold and ruby light breached the door to darkness, reaching further into the surrounding abyss than Sora cared to imagine.

And then everything *exploded*.

Yet despite the blinding light slamming against his eyes, Sora recognized who had just arrived, "Ryuko!?"

It was incredible.

He couldn't believe it.

But just to be certain this wasn't some sort of weird dream, he repeated himself, "Ryuko!? It is you... isn't it!?"

Her coat fluttered as she flipped through the darkness, one leg trailing behind the other and light streaming from her heart. Threadcutter shimmered, illuminated by motes of magical possibilities dancing between its teeth. Her hair fluttered around her face. And without a sound, eyes tracking each and every Heartless currently falling apart, Ryuko twisted sideways and landed in a kneeling crouch.

Ryuko, of course, heard Sora.

But one look at the doors - or really, how goddamn big they were - and her made-up-on-the-spot yet brilliant strategy to close them was replaced by an even better plan.

Threadcutter dissipated into scintillating light which clung to her fingers.

"The one and only," nodding at the kid on the other side of the cumbersome doors, Ryuko reached up, yanked the Rending Scissors off the necklaces dangling between her bare skin and neck, split them apart and instinctively looped the miniaturized blades around her thumbs. After too many years to count, it was almost instinctive. Sheets of hardened Life Fibers unraveled with little more than a twist of her wrists, "But we can sit down and talk later!"

If Mako were standing next to her, she'd probably exclaim something like 'Ryuko, your hair's glowing like a lightbulb.' And despite how embarrassing that would sound, Ryuko couldn't help but find herself subconsciously agreeing. Despite standing waist-deep in some of the nastiest darkness in the goddamn universe, surrounded by Heartless far more powerful and dangerous than normal, she didn't feel the slightest bit upset. Or depressed. Or any sort of negativity. She wanted to win. She was *going* to win. She was going to save everybody and everything.

There was nothing else to say.

Fumbling out the words while biting one wrist and then the other, Ryuko spat out the blood while focusing her thoughts inwards, searching for that awkward sensation which always left her feeling like she'd put on one of Mako's homemade yet really itchy sweaters.

A sound almost like, yet dissimilar to, her fingers plucking a guitar string resonated in the deepest abyss of Ryuko's heart as Life Fibers emerged from the slowly healing wounds.

"Because right now, we have a job to do!"

She did say something as the alien threads wound themselves around the Rending Scissors. Yet giving absolutely zero shits about anyone, including Gilgamesh, asking questions once the worlds were saved from darkness, Ryuko spun her dad's last remaining gift around her wrists fast enough that both Scissor Blades devolved into crimson blurs impossible for most to follow, caught them between her fingers and did the first thing that came to mind.

[img:

https://66.media.tumblr.com/254f5088f7112ec00d11f0ef6863f6a9/tumblr_p979ph4RIZ1vg0r9to1_540.gifv]

The Scissor Blades barely sunk into the doors.

Maybe a couple of inches.

But it was enough.

Wrapping more and more Life Fibers around her hands until they shimmered, Ryuko cleared her throat before *pulling* as hard as goddamn possible, "And we're not leaving until we're done, got it!?"

Her words fell upon deafened ears.

"Master Ryuko!" leaning underneath Goofy, who'd stopped pushing on the doors to watch Ryuko's dramatic entrance, Donald squawked, "We've been looking everywhere for you!"

"Is that right?" resembling a strange puppeteer rather than a Keyblade Master, Ryuko briefly pondered Donald's confession, "Well, I'm sorta glad ya didn't find me," right in the middle of her rousing yet subdued speech, probably because she was focusing on pulling the heavy as shit doors closed, her boots slipped against the ground. A problem corrected by leaning backwards, shifting her center of balance and pulling harder, "Because if ya did, I would never have found someone who *really* needed my help!"

"Someone?" Sora repeated what Ryuko said.

What did she mean by 'someone'?

Another Keyblade Master like Beatrix?

Or one of her friends?

But everything - *everything* - stopped when someone appeared behind the door opposite Aqua's.

"Do you plan on pulling your own weight, Sora?" sarcastically mocking his friend's shocked expression, Riku grinned, "Or am I going to have to do all the hard work around here?"

"As if!" the young Keyblade wielder shook his head, "I'm going to close these doors, with or without your help!"

A self-centered retch interrupted their reunion.

"Yes, yes, we're all enjoying this Saturday morning special on the immutable bonds of friendship," swallowing the bile in the back of his throat, Gilgamesh grumbled. Yet his sickening nausea had nothing to do with Sora and Riku, if he was remembering their names correctly, setting aside their childish differences. Well, maybe it did. A little. Not too much. And not enough for Ryuko to vow endless pain and suffering through nothing but her withering and frightening gaze if he didn't immediately shut up or switch to another topic.

He didn't even need to turn around to *feel* her monstrous animosity.

"But in case you have yet to notice - " an unspoken promise of physical retribution he, the great and powerful Gilgamesh, nonchalantly brushed from his shoulders with the effortlessly afforded his station. If Ryuko wished to brood about theoretical problems, perhaps she could start with the two brats wasting valuable time talking instead of pulling their own weight when the entire universe's fate teetered upon a razor's edge, " - the Heartless have finished regrouping."

Aqua and Riku turned around.

Yet Ryuko didn't.

Not when she could *feel* the darkness.

Gilgamesh hadn't been blowing smoke out of his ass. The Heartless were coming. And not just standard, run-of-the-mill shadows. But every conceivable type of Heartless - big, small and medium.

Behemoths. Hunters of the Dark. Darksides. And a few she didn't recognize. Hundreds of glowing yellow eyes stared not at her or Aqua, but the ambiguous nothingness awaiting beyond the open doors. Buffeted by the intensifying darkness pressing against her heart only to bounce away thanks to the coat, hair whipping back and forth in front of her face, adrenaline rushed through her veins. An eyebrow twitched. The corners of her mouth settled into a firm scowl.

And then she smirked.

"Heh..." excitement thrummed through Ryuko's heart when someone quite familiar yet lacking any sense of timing emerged onto the scene, cutting through Heartless after Heartless faster than the naked eye could possibly follow, ["Show off."](#)

On the other side of the door of darkness, eyes widening despite the powerful light, Goofy and Donald's jaws metaphorically - then quite physically - dropped, "YOUR MAJESTY!?"

"Gosh, I'm awfully sorry about making you guys wait so long," leaping onto a mushroom-shaped column of glowing minerals, energy tinted deep blue coursing through pulsating veins underneath his shoes, he flipped head over foot, tail swishing and ears twitching. As the unfortunate Behemoth he'd used as a stepping stool collapsed to the ground in a rather loud *boom*, Mickey smiled at Sora and Ryuko and everyone else, light of the purest variety radiating from the newly acquired Keyblade clasped between his fingers, "It just took me a little longer than expected to find this key!"

There was so much Sora didn't understand.

How did this guy take down one of those super powerful Heartless?

How did he know Ryuko?

And why did it feel like he'd meet him before?

"Wait!" gawking in a very particularly obvious fashion, one Riku and Kairi would recognize in a heartbeat, Sora leaned underneath Goofy yet above Donald, "I have so many questions!"

"Ya can ask King Mickey all the questions ya want later, Sora," shoulder firmly wedged against the door not quite as large as some of the doors they'd seen across the worlds but still enormous, hat askew and boots slipping against the ground, Goofy resumed pushing, "I'm sure he'll be delighted to talk with you!"

"It would be an honor, Sora!" Mickey smiled. Or at least, tried smiling, "But, ya know, I sure wish you didn't need to do this," Keyblade held aloft and light pushing back the encroaching darkness, he nevertheless maintained a brave face, "You've come so far... helped so many people... saved countless worlds. I wish ya could've had a normal life, Sora. But the Keyblade must've chose you for a reason..."

The king paused, searching for the right words.

"So, if it's not too much trouble - " it didn't take long. No more than a second. And as a beacon of light and hope against the thickening darkness, the king of Disney Castle and friend of Ryuko, Satsuki and countless others he'd met throughout his adventures raised his Keyblade with renewed passion and vigor, " - can I ask ya to help out just a little more?"

"Help?" Sora repeated.

"The door of darkness... tied by two keys. The door of darkness... to seal the light," Mickey repeated the ancient legend he'd found after spending months digging through the Lindblum Royal Archives. A nondescript passage written by someone from an age long forgotten, their name forever lost to the annals of time, "I'd planned on Ryuko being the other key - "

"Tch," Ryuko clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, arms trembling as she pulled on the Rending Scissors, "You could have

told me!"

" - but as they say, the best laid plans often go astray," finishing with a noticeably weary smile on his face, the benevolent king nodded, first at Ryuko and Aqua, before extending his hand towards Sora and Donald and Goofy, "So, do you mind bein' the other key?"

Sora didn't need to think twice, "Alright!" but almost immediately afterwards, something bothered him. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on, "Wait!" a switch flipped inside his head. A mental snap of his fingers that left him nearly stammering, "What about you? If we close these doors, won't you be trapped inside?"

For an ephemeral moment, Aqua saw someone in Sora's place.

A horrible monster who'd destroyed so many lives and nearly tore apart her friendships with Ven, Terra and Ryuko.

"Don't worry about us," but just as quickly as the painful memories surfaced inside her thawing heart, *he* disappeared. Black hair returned to brown. Malevolent yellow eyes darkened to innocent blue. Armor transformed to clothes. And once more looking at Sora, who'd risked everything for his friends, Aqua smiled, "We already have our ticket out of this place."

"HUMPH!!!"

The multiarmed swordsman looming over the Keyblade Master through no fault of his own derisively hmphed, "I'm not doing this for free! Saving the worlds costs extra, you know!"

"Oh, shut up!" if her hands weren't wrapped in Life Fibers - and the fate of the universe wasn't hanging by a fraying thread - Ryuko would've punched Gilgamesh, "Nobody cares!"

"Says the woman who cheated on me," the infamous appropriator and legendary weapon aficionado bristled despite sounding like someone kicked him in the stomach. Grasping the door with

everything he could physically muster, fingers cramping from the effort, Gilgamesh stomped his right foot against the ground, swept a heel clockwise alongside a thin cloud of dust and doubled his efforts, "You refuse to fight me yet throw yourself at the first doppelgänger who crosses your path! I thought we had something special!"

Ryuko's head whipped forward fast enough to give her vertigo, "The hell does that - "

Two sets of blue eyes, one as warm as a summer afternoon and the other ringed by spokes, widened when someone cried out.

"Mickey!"

As soon as the Heartless appeared, *thousands* of Heartless coalesced into what she could barely fathom as a monstrous amalgamation of darkness unlike even the earlier tidal waves they'd fought, Aqua used the door as a footstep, pushing away from Gilgamesh while Master's Defender materialized from the depths of her heart.

Without considering the ramifications of leaving the door to darkness open, Ryuko turned around, Life Fibers snaking back into her sleeves as the Heartless tossed Mickey against the cavern's wall, his pained cries enough for Threadcutter to spontaneously manifest in an explosion of pure crimson. Moving upon reflex, anger and emotion, she caught Aqua's notice during the brief moment they stood next to one another before the Heartless *moved*.

And she, in turn, crossed one foot over the other, lurched sideways and vaulted over the approaching swarm, claws futilely swiping through the darkness inches from her face.

In that same snapshot of time, back arched and arms tucked against her stomach, she twisted her shoulders and *swung*.

Threadcutter lashed out.

Heartless disintegrated underneath the blur of crimson and gold light.

Yet only later would Ryuko realize she was the lucky one.

"Oh no!" pulling himself back onto his feet, shirt dissolving into light thanks to the enchantment Master Yen Sid wove into the fabric at his behest some time ago, Mickey summoned his Keyblade as Aqua was overwhelmed by the relentless darkness, "Aqua!"

But he was too late.

Too slow.

"Coming through!"

Gilgamesh wasn't quite certain *why* he did what he did.

Nor why he shouted such inane drivel.

The Keyblade Master had been doomed the moment she'd gotten herself swept away by the darkness. He had no reason to save her. According to her order's own edicts, saving the worlds from darkness took precedence over her life. Besides, even if that happened to not be something made up to make himself feel better, she was moving far too quickly for him to save. Nevertheless, despite knowing closing the doors posed significantly less risk to his health and well-being, his feet moved by themselves. Reaching into the darkness as Mickey and Ryuko passed in the periphery, his fingers clasped Lightbringer's hilt before manifesting the rest of the legendary blade with an audible *sheen* of light.

Once again, Gilgamesh didn't understand *why* he did what he did.

He considered himself more of an adventurous connoisseur than any sort of hero.

Maybe a little bit of Ryuko rubbed off on him.

But no matter the reason, he raced upon the wind using nothing but his own strength.

"Got ya!"

However, despite his proclamation, as soon as he grabbed the blue haired master's hand, Gilgamesh felt himself getting dragged into the maelstrom.

A *slight* trickle of panic admittedly settled his heart.

"No time to explain!" Ryuko would probably have sharp words for him once this was over and done with. Or punch him. Or both. Or some combination of other things his mind could barely fathom given the circumstances. Resorting to emergency procedure enacted after his harrowing escape from that terrifying sorceress who could summon every element using naught but the subtlest movement of her right eyebrow, Gilgamesh pulled Aqua closer, "You'll thank me later!"

With his upper arms free of any burdensome weapons at the moment, he grabbed something.

Darkness, crackling and writhing around itself, appeared midair.

And right before the Heartless would've dragged them through the strange wooden door most likely leading back to the islands, Gilgamesh tucked his knees, flipped forward, wrapped his cloak around Aqua and vanished through the haphazardly created portal.

Last edited: Mar 31, 2020

Unknown Report 18

Unknown Report 18

Sand.

He *hated* sand.

It got everywhere.

And he meant *everywhere*.

But it was his own fault really.

Traversing the darkness required precision, focus and concentration. It was annoying, yes, but as with many things, practice made perfect. And because darkness trickled off his heart like rain falling down one's back in a thunderstorm, he could afford taking the random shortcut in response to legitimate panic at simultaneously getting drowned, frozen, electrocuted and crushed beneath a barrage of impossibly strong magic. Or trapped within the darkness for an eternity. But there were drawbacks to everything. Consequences for spitting in the face of destiny itself. If one did not properly plan out their agenda for whatever reason - such as escaping a rampaging sorceress, stuck-up paladins or an eldritch monster summoned via an arcane and long-forgotten ritual - weird things happened.

Like where on a world said corridor opened.

And how far *up* on said world said corridor opened.

The latter of which tended to be significantly more important than the former.

With sand lodged in unspeakable places he dared not repeat, Gilgamesh pressed a thumb against the front of his kabuto, tilting it backwards and accidentally unleashing a torrent of the desert's

finest silt like so many droplets in a storm. It was annoying. Frustrating, if he were to be so bold as to express his feelings on the matter. But guided by something beyond instinct, he reached out, grasped Lightbringer by the blade of legend's crystalline and metal hilt and with a quick *yank*, excised the glowing blade, whether by the setting sun or some inner power to combat the darkness he cared not, from where it landed upon his return to the worlds and looked around.

Agrabah.

Why did it drop them in Agrabah?

He, of course, knew the answer.

Recent events were quite fresh in his mind. Almost as if they'd happened moments ago. No doubt Ryuko and Mickey were worried sick. Probably concerned about them. Which was to be expected. Yet if past was prelude, Ryuko was more likely than not thinking about punching him. Why? He had no idea. Her temper was legendary. But that kid. Since when were random children given Keyblades and told to go save the world? Sora, was it? Yes. After everything was said and done - and the mouse handed over payment - he might spend some time looking into the situation. Because he was moderately certain Ryuko knew the spiky-haired brat with atrocious and hideous shoes much too big for his feet.

"Hmm," but first things first, looking around the landscape stretching towards the horizon in every conceivable direction, Gilgamesh scratched his neck as a mocking breeze whistled over the dunes, "I wonder what she's doing up there?"

High above the desert catching the sun's fading embers, the blue haired master - Aqua, Gilgamesh reminded himself with no small amount of self-derision - hovered upon an intricate bow-and-platform glider. Something the woman had conjured almost immediately upon escaping the darkness, repaying his selfless heroism by allowing him to fall hundreds of feet to an almost certain demise without so much

as an apology. Usually he'd be angry. Maybe a little perturbed about the sudden and unexpected betrayal from someone who probably deigned themselves a protector of the worlds.

But considering the circumstances, who knows what might have happened if not for his quick thinking.

For all he knew, Aqua might have found herself utterly bereft of companionship and light, heart slowly succumbing to darkness and despair.

So maybe she deserved a pass.

Just this once.

"Still -" grumbling to himself, Gilgamesh folded his arms, two sets of them, and collapsed to the ground, sand billowing around his pants as the impact kicked up a cloud of dust that nearly reached his face. Keyblade wielders were so *strange*. Trust in your heart this... believe in your friends that... never give up and darkness won't win. Humph! Optimism was great and all, but reality demanded pragmatism. Which was probably why he'd never heard Ryuko spew such nonsensical dribble. Nor Satsuki. Only Mako. And everybody knew - yet never stated out of fear of getting their asses handed to them by Ryuko - there was a lot of empty space in Mako's head.

" - a thanks would be appreciated," he finished, more to himself than anyone.

And not a moment too soon.

"It's... beautiful..."

Aqua's breathless wonder... the newfound shimmer of hope in her eyes... forced Gilgamesh to amend his criticism, "Or, well, maybe an I.O.U."

Through eyes long since accustomed to darkness, Aqua stared across the endless desert. Deepening twilight painted the barren landscape various purples and indigos, yellows rapidly shifting to oranges and reds. There was nothing around. No trace of life. Yet it was beautiful. The lack of darkness made everything look brighter. Fresher. Newer. More colorful. As if she'd just remembered how to see. And the shimmering sun setting below the horizon almost filled her eyes with tears. She was back. She was *finally* back. After never-ending battles against the Heartless and moments in which she'd nearly given up, she was home.

Her nightmare was finally over.

Dissolving into motes of scintillating light too numerous to count as soon as she stepped off, Stormfell returned to her trembling fingers, steadying them. Lungs long used to darkness struggled. Yet Aqua found herself staring at the Keyblade weighing down her arm. Yet she felt neither confusion nor worry. Rather, an overwhelming sense of relief drew her lips into a faint smile almost impossible to notice. For the first time in years, tears lingering in the corners of her eyes, she held her Keyblade. Its familiar presence introduced a long-forgotten warmth which spread from her heart to her fingers and toes.

This was *her* Keyblade.

Nothing could ever replace it.

"What world - " swallowing the lump in her throat, blue hair brushing the tip of her nose, Aqua struggled to speak, "What world is this?"

"Agrabah," Gilgamesh pointed Aqua's attention towards the city *far* on the horizon, golden domed towers surrounded by steep cliffs reflecting the final gasp of light.

"And while I would have preferred a 'thank you' for my efforts," propping a hand on each knee, the swordsman renowned across the worlds as the greatest connoisseur of weaponry pushed himself onto

his feet, sand falling from his polka dotted sabatons, "That's neither here nor there."

He held no naïve compunctions about the dangers of staying on Agrabah instead of fleeing to another realm. One safer and less likely to chase him to the ends of the worlds. And for good reason. After escaping the ancient catacombs buried beneath the royal palace, hidden behind mystical locks impervious to most thieves, and before running into that fat bandit who ruined a perfectly good adventure, he'd held an interesting - and by interesting he meant a one-sided argument while running across rooftops and through alleys - conversation with the captain of the guards.

One in which most of the standard death threats were thrown his way.

Head mounted above one's mantle... skinned alive... boiled in burning tar...

Nothing too inventive.

I've fulfilled my end of the deal," resting Lightbringer on the juncture of his shoulder and neck, Gilgamesh slid down the dune, the first of many steps towards the shining jewel in the desert that was Agrabah. If he was lucky, that obnoxious street rat and his flea-infested monkey were still in town. Which meant recovering Anastasia was still possible despite Ryuko's threats, "Therefore, this is where you and I part ways!"

"Wait!"

As the woman's desperation reached his ears, Gilgamesh nearly broke his nose against a wall of glacial ice springing forth from the sand.

"Do you not understand the meaning of goodbye?" yet a single swing of the legendary blade shattered the magical barricade, "If you

want to stick around and freeze to death in the desert, be my guest. I, on the other hand, have better things to do."

"You can't leave!" Aqua lurched forward, her boots sinking into the sand as she raced after the swordsman, "We have to go back! Ryuko and Mickey - "

" - will be fine without us!"

Slightly wary of the Keyblade aimed at his stomach, but not more so than whenever Ryuko did the same thing with Threadcutter only about a foot lower, Gilgamesh gently yet firmly stepped around Aqua, "Besides, even if I threw common sense to the wind and wanted to go back, it's impossible."

Aqua moved to speak only to stop herself, "What do you mean?"

Out of everything, that was the worst possible question she could have asked. Damn it! Why did this woman have to ask such intelligent and philosophical questions? Ugh! How could he hope to convey deep metaphysical connections between light and darkness and the space between in twenty words or less? Let alone quickly enough to both engage the reader's mind yet not cause them to drift off and seek stimulations elsewhere?

"It's not like opening and closing a door... or following a map through Lindblum... or teleportation," Gilgamesh kicked his foot against the sand. He hated every minute of this. Why on earth couldn't Aqua do something familiar. Like vow to find another way to save Ryuko. Or argue he was being stubborn. Or follow in Ryuko's footsteps and throw caution to the wind and do her own thing, "There's no rhythm nor reason. No method to the darkness's madness. It's easy to breach the surface of the darkness. I can do that in my sleep. But any deeper and you're asking for serious trouble. Heart shattering into billions of pieces. That sort of serious trouble."

"You're saying - " Aqua's voice audibly hitched, " - you're telling me... there's nothing I can do? Nothing at all?"

Gilgamesh considered himself tough.

But that tone?

"I've known Ryuko for years. Far longer than you. She's my sworn rival, fated to one day willingly wager those magnificent Rending Scissors in a cinematic no-holds-barred yet friendly battle," armor clanking as he turned aside, clothes rustling in the wind and painted features furrowing into an expression one couldn't confuse with anything but obsession, Gilgamesh stared one hundred and eighty degrees away from Aqua. Because he couldn't look at her. It was impossible. Watching her break down and cry out of despair at not being able to help her friends made his stomach clench.

Like he'd accidentally insulted Mako.

"Which why I can state the following with neither hesitation nor reservation," ugh, he hated getting sappy and emotional. But some things were necessary. And minimizing any chance of Ryuko passionately channeling her anger through her fists and into his face took precedence, "If Ryuko wants to escape the darkness, she'll find a way to do so. No ifs, ands or buts about it."

The desert wind howled.

Sand brushed against their bodies, tiny pinpricks of pain whenever the grains impacted bare skin.

"It's funny," Aqua didn't understand why, but she laughed.

"What's funny?"

"It's just..." seeking out the words her heart refused to admit, Aqua smiled, "... well..." a soft chuckle bubbled within her throat, "... it almost sounds like you care about Ryuko."

"Hmph! You've been in the darkness too long! I merely desire her Rending Scissors. A business transaction between rival swordsmen,"

dismissing the accusation with the same amount of effort one might place into ignoring nonsensical garbage, Gilgamesh threw his hands into the air and scoffed, "And I would suggest removing any impure thoughts from your heart!"

"What?" Aqua inquired, more confused than curious about Gilgamesh suggesting something so... bizarre.

"The only reason I risked my life saving yours is because that mouse promised me a blade of legend. Payment for helping him on his noble mission into the darkness," fully committed in denying the accusation of being 'friendly' no matter how fake and forced it sounded, the swordsman heralding himself as the greatest blademaster across all realms, both light and dark, huffed his the scarf conveniently covering his mouth, "And I intend on holding Mickey to that promise. Caliburn shall once more be mine! A blade equal to - no, surpassing - Excalibur!"

The Keyblade Master arched an eyebrow as her lips quirked, "If you say so..."

"I'm serious!"

Aqua's incredulous silence spoke volumes.

"Grr... whatever!" stalking his way towards Agrabah, no more than a couple of steps on a long and harrowing journey most likely stretching into the night, Gilgamesh slung Lightbringer onto his other shoulder. He wanted to leave. He should have left without another word. Yet something possessed him to ask a strange question, "You have anywhere to stay? You've been gone an awfully long time. I'm sure your friends are worried sick. Maybe you should give them a call or something."

"My friends..."

The innocuous question drained everything from Aqua's heart.

While she'd been trapped within the darkness, forced to wander the shadows without pause or reset, ten years had passed. Time had moved on without her. How many of the friends she'd met along the way - Peter Pan, Stitch and Zack - had fallen to the Heartless? How many worlds were lost, their splendor and beauty forever destroyed by darkness? How many people suffered because she hadn't been able to save Terra from Xehanort's influence? Aqua didn't want to think about such things. Yet even so, this was her chance to make things right.

Terra was still out there, his heart lost within the darkness.

And no matter how long it took... or how difficult the journey... she would save him.

Him and Ven.

"... I suppose so," holding a hand against her heart, Aqua shook her head, "But not yet. You were right, you know."

"Hm? I was? About what?"

Her feet moved of their own volition, carrying her towards Gilgamesh and then beyond the confused swordsman, "About Ryuko. You were right - she is strong. But so are Mickey and Sora. They'll close the door to darkness. I'm certain of it. And when they're finished, they'll figure out a way to come home."

A breathless moment passed as Aqua, almost independent of conscious thought, stared at Agrabah.

"And if not?" hanging limply between her calloused fingers, steel blue metal glittering with beauty one could spend decades describing only to fall short, Stormfell reflected the dying breath of sunlight sinking beneath the western horizon. Yet warmed by newfound hope blossoming within her chest, Aqua never stopped smiling, "Someone needs to be waiting for them. A light to guide them out of the darkness."

"Bah! Waiting is for suckers!"

Half-shivering from the bitter cold beginning to creep over the desert, Gilgamesh metaphorically threw his hands into the air, "And waiting out in the cold is even worse! I don't know about you, but I intend on surviving until tomorrow's dawn! You want to help Ryuko, be my guest. But don't drag me into another adventure!"

Armor clanked and sand shifted.

Several moments passed in awkward silence.

"Are you coming or not?" stopping halfway up another crescent-shaped dune, the bragging thief slash swordsman paused in his efforts to reach Agrabah, "As a courtesy to Ryuko and the mouse, I'll pay for your room and board. But just tonight! Tomorrow, you're on your own, got it!?"

Aqua didn't know what to say.

Her mouth opened and closed before settling into a firm yet motherly smile, "Alright..."

Terra...

Ven...

Please wait just a little longer...

Last edited: Apr 8, 2020

Chapter 18.3

As sometimes happens, I rewrote the ending of the last section (or rather, the second-to-last section). Since this, and that, were originally written to be one long segment, I needed to revise a few things. Clean up the writing. Adjust Gilgamesh's reasoning. Enjoy! But I still don't know why the developers had Mickey lose his shirt. Was it some sort of magical protection? Who knows. To be honest, they probably gave him his infamous appearance at the end of KH I (red button shorts, yellow shoes and white gloves but no shirt, realized their mistake in 2.8 and needed to come up with a reason why Mickey was running around half-naked at the end of the first game.

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/9/91/Matoi-ryuuko-transformation-start.jpg/revision/latest?cb=20150413052140>]

"Oh no!"

The glow of his shirt dissolving into light filled Mickey's vision as he shook his head, pulled himself off the floor, saw what was happening and summoned his Keyblade without another word. His shoulders hurt. His ears rang. His back bothered him. But this was nothing. He'd felt worse. And even if everything hurt, it would take more than a measly sneak attack from some Heartless to make him even consider thinking twice about helping someone who needed help more than anything in the world, "Hold on, Aqua!"

But he was too late.

Too slow.

Too far away to help Aqua.

"MAKE WAY!!!"

Gilgamesh wasn't quite certain why he did what he did.

Nor why he'd spouted such inane drivel.

There had to be something wrong with the air. A poison or magical spell. Maybe the darkness was stronger in this place than anticipated. Or the Genji Armor's protection had faltered along the way. Because risking his life didn't make a lick of sense! Pragmatically speaking, as soon as Aqua had gotten swept away by the Heartless due to no fault of her own, rescue was nearly impossible. He had no personal attachments to the Keyblade Master. Nor the required friendship necessary to throw caught to the wind! Which led back to his assessment something must be wrong. After all, according to her ancient order's obnoxiously phrased edicts, protecting the worlds took precedence over any individual's life.

Besides, even if that wasn't something thought up on the spot to assuage himself of any and all responsibility, what could he do?

Yet he was still running towards the blue haired woman.

Maybe being around Ryuko so often rubbed off onto his heart.

Or he liked Mako always complimenting and begging to know the majestic history of his latest and greatest acquisitions.

"GOT YA!!!"

No matter the reason, if a reason existed in the first place, Gilgamesh flew upon the wind, Lightbringer swinging before he'd finished withdrawing the blade of legend from his secret pocket dimension. It should have been his triumph! His victory! Even if he didn't understand why he was doing what he was doing, doing so would have instilled enough respect into Ryuko so that if, or rather when, she decided to physically hold him at her mercy for whatever inane reason passed through her short-tempered mind, he could draw upon this event and counterargue without excessive bluster!

Yet despite actively trying, after a certain point, to save the woman, Lightbringer carving through Heartless as easily as one spread

grape jam on toast with a new knife, as soon as he reached Aqua, grabbing onto her Keyblade when she'd helpfully extended the legendary but notoriously picky blade in his general direction, Gilgamesh didn't screech like a girl when something yanked him off the ground.

"WHOA!!!"

... maybe he screamed.

But screech?

Definitely not!

"Alright, time for a more hands-on approach," a slight trickle of panic, not too much, filtered through Gilgamesh's mind as he felt himself getting dragged into the maelstrom. He was going to have words with the mouse. This wasn't in his contract. But for the moment, he focused on lesson numero uno. The underlined descriptions in the script. Instead of concerning himself with the future, he flowed with the current, swimming around Heartless desperately trying to claw at the Genji Armor yet finding said armor impenetrable, "Hold your nose!"

It was only thanks to the bonds of friendship between them that Aqua hastily covered her nose.

"Exit," announcing his intent with unbridled passion and boisterous fury, Gilgamesh thrust one arm forward, wrist twisted inwards and fingers slightly curled, "Stage right!"

Streaming from his heart, proud and stubborn yet not quite devoid of selflessness, darkness crackled and writhed.

It was close. Far too close for his liking. But he pulled it off by the skin of his metaphorical teeth. Right before the Heartless would've successfully dragged them through the mysterious wooden door leading further into the realm of darkness, it happened. And upon

watching himself pull off the impossible, far easily said than done, Gilgamesh tucked his knees against his chest, flipped forward, drove his feet through multiple living shadows and vanished into the haphazardly materialized gateway

"MASTER AQUA!!!"

Ryuko's ears range when Donald and Goofy screamed Aqua's name.

But she was too busy dealing with her own problems.

"Damn it!" as Gilgamesh grabbed Aqua, vanished into the darkness and left her hanging, Ryuko's grip around Threadcutter tightened. Her Keyblade screamed. Not from the pressure but the emotions roiling within her enraged and boiling heart. And when the Heartless pulled a one-eighty, reversing directions at the drop of a hat, rearing backwards like a cornered snake and rushed towards her, hundreds upon hundreds of shadows seeking refuge beyond the darkness by going through her, she was ready, "Fine! You want to do this!?"

Flames spun around Threadcutter.

She saw, then felt, larger Heartless emerge from the shadows, "Then let's DO THIS!!!"

Reaching deep into her soul, Ryuko sought the power, grasped it and forced it to the surface. Steam passed through charring lips. Her hair, crimson gaining an eerie mixture of orange and yellow, fluttered like fire in the wind. Flames rose from her clothes as she gripped Threadcutter with both hands. She scrapped her foot across the ground, spat sideways, pinched the inside of her cheek and pushed that parade of unbridled strength into her Keyblade, "**METEOR** - "

"LIGHT!!!"

Beams of white light flashed over her head, hitting the Heartless like a truck and driving them backwards.

"Ryuko, go help Sora!" if he was bothered by the heat, Mickey showed not an ounce of discomfort as he landed in front of Ryuko, light gifting his Keyblade a mystical glow, "I'll finish dealing with these Heartless!"

The blistering flames surrounding Threadcutter flickered Ryuko processed his request.

"What? No way!" only to once more strengthen, although nowhere near to the same extent when she pointed her Keyblade at the Heartless, "You help Sora! I can take the Heartless!"

"I know you can," Mickey grimaced as the Heartless reorganized themselves, "But if those doors aren't closed - and soon - the worlds will be in major trouble!"

Ryuko opened her mouth.

Yet nothing came out.

And the flames around Threadcutter, as well as the unnatural glow within her hair, gently faded, leaving her feeling slightly cold.

"You've helped so much. More than I could possibly thank you for," her silence was deafening. Perhaps too much. Mickey understood why Ryuko wanted to help. Gosh, he understood her perfectly, "I know, without a doubt, you're strong enough to defeat these Heartless. After all, between the two of us, you're definitely stronger."

"What? No!" stammering at the compliment, Ryuko searched for an excuse, "I can't even pull off half the sh... stuff you do!"

"I suppose we're stronger in our own ways," Mickey conceded, brows furrowing when the Heartless started moving, "Now go! I'll hold off the Heartless as long as I can!"

Ryuko wanted to argue.

She wanted to help.

But after what felt like an eternity but was no longer than a heartbeat, knuckles blanched white and trembling she said the first thing that came to mind.

"Just try not to kick the bucket, will ya?" toes pressing against the soles of her boots, heels barely leaving the ground, Ryuko flipped Threadcutter around her fingers and didn't hesitate for a moment before throwing it across the cavern.

It felt like her entire existence was being squeezed through a thin straw.

Space and time became one and the same.

"Gawrsh," Goofy blinked when Ryuko appeared out of nowhere in a flash of bright red light, "Are ya alright, Master Ryuko? Yer hair's on fire. Well, more on fire than usual."

"How many times have - never mind," for the thousandth time, Ryuko stopped herself from correcting Goofy. What was the point? If she asked him to quit calling her master, Goofy would just start calling her hero. And if she asked him to stop calling her hero, he'd go back to calling her master or something equally embarrassing.

It was a never-ending cycle.

"I'm fine," dismissing Threadcutter while ignoring Goofy's comment about her hair, Ryuko grabbed the same door she'd been pulling before shit went south, "Just keep pushing!"

"You heard her!" underneath Goofy and across from Sora, Donald stuck his head between the doors, took one look at Mickey throwing everything plus the kitchen sink at the Heartless and swallowed the lump in his throat, "On the count of three... PUSH!!!"

Nothing.

"Where was... the three count?" Riku gasped.

"Heh..." Sora panted, cheek pressed against the door, "... you get... used to... it..."

"Come... on..." Ryuko snarled, changing a word at the last second to stop herself from cursing up a storm, "... close... already..."

What the hell was with this freaking door? Her neck ached. Her fingers were cramping. Her arms burned. Spit dripped from her lips. Nausea bubbled inside her stomach. If she'd had lunch or something, it would probably already be spewed all over the ground. But she couldn't stop. Not now. Not ever. Not when everyone was counting on them. But for someone who'd punched monsters larger than most buildings flat on their asses, Ryuko couldn't understand why she couldn't close a stupid door.

"You can do it, Ryuko!"

The familiar - too familiar - voice cut through the darkness like a knife. Ryuko's eyes widened. Her head snapped back and forth, feathery bangs flipping along the way. What the hell was going on? Was that... was that Mako? No. It couldn't be. Mako wasn't here. It had to be a trick of the darkness. But her heart said it was Mako. Her soul said it was her best friend cheering her from the sidelines. But that was impossible. Wasn't it?

"Ryuko?" pulling on the other door, arms burning and sweat pouring down his face, Riku gasped out the question between strained self-motivational grunts, "What's going on. There something out there?"

"I - " Ryuko bit the inside of her cheek before shaking her head, "It's nothing. Just keep -"

"Let's finish it. Together."

That was Satsuki.

"Never forget who you are, Ryuko."

Beatrix.

"Strength is not born from solitude, but friendship."

Steiner.

"Do you intend on surrendering so easily?"

Gamagori.

"The Matoi I know wouldn't give up without a fight."

Inumuta.

"You're not gonna wimp out so close to the finish, are ya?"

Jecht.

"This is your story, Ryuko, make no mistake."

Auron.

"Ryyyuuuukkkooo!!!"

Gilgamesh.

"Don't give up, Ryuko!"

Aqua.

"Ryuko!"

It was as if a veil had been lifted from her eyes.

"Heh," a noise somewhere between a cough and a hitch escaped Ryuko's heart at the last voice. She wanted to say more, to call herself stupid, yet found herself unable to do so.

How could she have forgotten something so important? Why had she been acting like a schoolyard punk fighting with her fists and Scissor Blade against the world and anyone standing in her way? Ryuko wracked her mind but couldn't come up with an answer. Maybe the pressure had been too much. Fighting that second-hand Life Fiber bastard after destroying the Cloud of Darkness hadn't been a walk in the park. And darkness did batcrap crazy things to the heart. But whatever the reason, Ryuko couldn't find herself to care. Not anymore.

Because she finally understood the truth.

These weren't voices - but hearts.

Mako. Satsuki. Everyone.

Her friends.

Those she'd met along the way.

"I'm not alone. I've never been alone," as the crimson light within her hair cranked up the volume to eleven, Ryuko felt something. A comforting warmth unrelated to the light bathing her soul, "Which means -"

This wasn't the first time she'd felt someone's heart. On more than one occasion, whenever Satsuki got emotional in the way nobody else could tell, she'd feel her sis's presence. Like they were standing in the same room. And more often than not, Mako would snuggle against her heart like a warm blanket. Something she'd missed since stepping into the realm of darkness. But this? This? This was entirely different than anything she'd experienced before. Like comparing night and day. Or comparing Senketsu to Junketsu.

Muscles burning and head spinning, Ryuko exclaimed loudly and proudly, " - giving up ain't an option!"

The creak shook the darkness itself.

It sent waves rippling through the shadows.

An almost unholy din roared in the darkness behind them, matched only by Mickey keeping the Heartless from getting closer.

"It's... working..." Sora grunted when the door he'd been pushing for who-knew-how-long, even for a moment, moved.

"Don't start... celebrating yet..." Donald grumbled, caught between gasping and catching his breath.

"Come on, Donald," adding his two cents, Goofy guffawed, "Ya could be more encouraging."

The court mage, utterly exhausted by everything, surrendered almost without a fight, "Oh brother."

Something about their argument, how Sora and Donald and Goofy bounced comments and insults off each other without sounding mean, poked Ryuko's heart. She frowned. Her lips pursed. Sweat redirecting itself around furrowed brows. She had a lot to say. There was a lot she wanted to say. But before she could, as if someone decided to purposely screw with her, one of the Rending Scissors clattered to the ground behind them, knocked loose by the commotion. She barely heard it. As a matter of fact, it was only because Goofy pointed it out that she looked over her shoulder, catching the other half falling from the door to darkness at the last second, leaving both halves standing side by side in the darkness, glittering blades crossed over one another.

Licking her lips, she stared at the fallen pair of hardened Life Fibers, unsure whether or not to say what she really wanted to say.

Eh, screw it.

"If I'm not back soon, make sure Mako doesn't do anything too dangerous," Ryuko directed her ire not at Sora or Riku, but Donald and Goofy, whose twin nods suggested they knew exactly what she

was talking about, "I may be made of money, but I don't want to remodel my kitchen!"

Remembering the last time Mako cooked something exotic, a spicy nightmare that had let to thousands of Gil's worth of property damage and mental trauma, Donald shuttered.

"You can count on us, Master Ryuko," contrary to his friend's memories of the incident on their minds, Goofy had enjoyed Mako's cooking, "But I'm sure Gamagori knows better than to let Mako go anywhere near the black market."

Well, that was one thing down.

"Eh -" an almost hesitant grumble whistled between Ryuko's teeth. In theory, as Satsuki always said right before her sis heaped criticism on whatever plan she'd come up with on the spot, Goofy was onto something. Aside from herself, Gamagori was the only person who could stop Mako from doing anything too dangerous. Oh, who was she kidding? The guy was a complete pushover. Three hundred and something pounds of spineless muscle. She'd have better luck convincing Satsuki to shave her eyes without a fight than Gamagori criticizing Mako's 'imaginative' cooking in any way, shape or form, " - you still better keep an eye on her. Just in case, ya know..."

Nothing more needed to be said.

Not about that, anyway.

"Oh," pushing Mako's 'special and interesting additions' to an otherwise normal recipe to the deepest depths of her mind and locking them away, Ryuko addressed the other elephant in the room, "Hey! You gonna say anything?"

Riku, younger than when she'd bulldozed through Honnouji, somehow had the exact same look Mako had whenever Gamagori sputtered an opinion about a dress, "Sora, I -"

"Whatever it is, you can tell me later," interrupting before Riku finished, Sora grinned, "When we're back home! Promise?"

It would have been easy to hold Sora to that promise.

"Sora, take care of Kairi," but as the doors closed, darkness once more pressing against his heart as the light faded, Riku found he couldn't hold himself to such an optimistic promise.

He knew the truth. Even if he didn't like it, Sora knew what Riku was implying. A somber frown pulled down his confidence. After coming all this way, defeating Ansem and helping to stop Maleficent from opening the final keyhole, leaving without Riku left a bitter taste in his mouth. But unable to think of anything to say, not even bragging about Kairi being strong enough to protect herself, he nodded.

And then Riku and Ryuko vanished, leaving him, Donald and Goofy stranded outside.

Beyond the doors, breaking away from the Heartless with one final burst of light from his Keyblade, Mickey leapt over a Behemoth, slicing the monster down its spine before sprinting across the cavern illuminated by an artificial Kingdom Hearts. He jumped off the wall when another dozen or so Heartless tried grabbing him. He lashed out, reducing them to nothing but shadows before flipping forward several times and landing back where he'd started.

"Alright!" huffing for breath, the exhausted king watched Ryuko yank the Rending Scissors out of the ground before nodding, their eyes meeting in the darkness.

This was the moment he'd been waiting for. Ryuko, Sora, Riku, Donald and Goofy had closed the doors. Aqua and Gilgamesh were safe back. All that remained was to finish what he'd started. Adrenaline made his fingers tingle. He was short of breath. He couldn't believe it was finally happening. At last, he could accomplish his mission, "Riku! Ryuko! Stand back!"

He could feel them coming.

The Heartless.

They were returning, stronger and more numerous.

Which was why Mickey didn't waste another second aiming his Keyblade, knowing Sora was doing the same on the other side, "It's time we locked these doors once and for all!"

It happened so quickly.

A beam of light emerged from Mickey's Keyblade, connecting with the door to darkness in an explosion of brilliance.

Holding onto the Rending Scissors, Ryuko swallowed the lump in the back of her throat.

She'd done pretty much the same thing more times than she cared to remember.

Or wished to.

But this felt different.

This felt bigger.

Out of nowhere, world tilted underneath her feet.

Because she was falling...

... falling...

[... falling...](#)

Last edited: Apr 18, 2020

Re:Mind [Couturier: Première]

Re:Mind [Couturier: Première]

Lindblum had always held a special place in her heart.

It was where everything changed.

Where one door closed and another opened.

As she meandered her way through the infamous city-world, cast-iron lanterns illuminated emptied streets in autumnal oranges, yellows and reds. The shafts of light flickered in the languid breeze, steam gently rising from burnt glass whenever another droplet of rain fell onto their surfaces. The tranquil silence turned every sound into a cacophonous whisper. She could pinpoint a mouse scurrying in the shadows. Muffled conversations and arguments behind shuttered windows, some especially juicy and gossipy, reached her ears.

Somewhere in the distance, a handful of Heartless crawled across the ground.

Yet none of those boring things stoked her deep passions.

"Hmm... hmm... hmm-hmm-hmm..."

Humming under her breath, heeled boots rhythmically clacking against cobblestone slickened by the storm unleashing itself upon the sleeping world, she shifted the fuchsia umbrella keeping the rain from touching her hair. Translucent yet transparent enough to evoke wanton curiosity, magenta near the top and fading to something resembling crepe around the bottom, it harkened to something from her past. A cute and fashionable accessory she'd carried almost everything until things turned sour. But that had been somewhat her fault. A mistaken she wasn't too keen on repeating any time soon.

Or ever, really.

"Hmm... hmm... bum-bum..."

Lindblum brought back memories. Of course, it had been quite a while since she'd visited. But with everybody preoccupied saving the worlds, she could finally stretch her legs, breath fresh air, take in the sights and catch up with Moonte. Presuming, as one should always do when talking to moogles, he hadn't relocated his shop to another district in order to avoid paying taxes. Again. Of course, as fate had it, not only was it too late to do anything, but it was raining. Covering the world like a wooly blanket, steel grey clouds poured their hearts and souls upon the world, devouring the lingering traces of autumn warmth.

No wonder everybody was hunkered inside their houses.

"Bum-bum-bum..."

What little rain escaped the voluminous embrace of her cute umbrella found itself overwhelmed by the matching double-breasted trench coat and skirt combination, belts strapped around her waist and wrists while a few hung loosely against her legs. A subdued yet attractive fuchsia. One hundred percent resistant to darkness and water. Her own design, which she'd been meaning to wear for quite some time.

"... bum-bah-bum-bum..."

She passed stores and shops closed for the night, doors locked and windows dark.

Every now and then, when thunder didn't break the monotonous rainfall, an airship passed overhead, flying through the storm towards or away from the grand castle.

And yet she didn't care in the slightest.

Paying no heed to the humans crowded into the tavern at the corner, rancorous sounds of laughter and merriment little more than noise in

the background, her smile, almost warmer than a summer's day, widened.

"Hmm... hmm... hmm-hmm-hmm..."

The innocuous melody radiated utmost innocence.

"Bum-bum-bum bum-bah-bum-bum..."

Water splashed around her boots as she wandered the streets with no real destination in mind.

Lightning crackled overhead, bathing the dreary world with beautiful blue and white arcs.

And after an inappropriate amount of time, she turned into an alley barely wide enough to fit three humans standing shoulder-to-shoulder.

"Well, this is as good a spot as any."

Speaking with the same urgency one might have while putting on new clothes in the morning, she tilted her head backwards, looking beyond the umbrella repelling the rain towards the enormous castle standing protectively over Lindblum. It was cute. An almost perfect vantage point. But not why she'd come here. Thumb and pointer finger rolling the umbrella's shaft back and forth, her smile darkened when another set of heavy and cumbersome footsteps stopped dead in their tracks at the alley's entrance, "Usually I don't make exceptions but for ~you~ I'm willing to squeeze in an opening..."

"Give me your Gil!" the mugger, at least she presumed he was a mugger and not some down-on-their-luck mercenary, brandished a rusted dagger that had seen better days, "Now!"

"Oh?" finding the implied threat absolutely adorable, she switched her umbrella from her right shoulder to her left, "And why on earth would I ~ever~ do something like that?"

"Didn't you hear me?" whoever or whatever the pathetic man was, snarled, "Hand over everything you got!"

"No," still refusing to face the human, her answer was curt. Short. Bereft of amusement, "I don't think I will."

"What!?" the mugger balked, almost as if he didn't expect a poor and defenseless woman to talk back, "Do you want to die!?"

"Die? Me? Hardly," as expected, the alleyway was empty. Devoid of curious eyes she'd have to blind and open ears she'd need to silence. Not a soul or heart around apart from herself and the inconsiderable moron who'd bit off ~far~ more than he could chew. And so, rain pouring onto them, she peeked over her shoulder, lips curled into a smile not quite reaching her narrowing blue eyes, "Because unless you can defeat Ryuko all by your lonesome self, you have absolutely chance of leaving so much as a scratch on my finger."

"What?" repeating himself, the unnerved thief swung his dagger. He'd heard of Ryuko. Everybody knew of the woman. But this bitch wasn't Ryuko, "Shut the hell up before I - "

He stopped.

The dagger clattered to the ground.

"W-What's going on?" his heart plummeted when dozens - no, hundreds - of purplish-red strings spun through the darkness around him, "What the fuck are you!?"

An amused titter escaped the woman's heart.

"Normally I'd be too busy to play with a nobody like you," as one of her fingers twitched, she turned away from the human, "But this was my day off. And you ruined it. Oh, and FYI..."

The Life Fibers pulled taut.

A wet squelch almost like someone slapping pieces of meat on the ground was followed by nightmarish silence.

"... you ~really~ shouldn't talk to a woman like that," unbothered by the bloody mess spreading across the ground in front of her feet, Nui Harime stepped over the dismembered pig in human clothing, "It's awfully rude."

But she didn't get far before abruptly stopping,

"Oops," an almost bashful expression replaced her smile as she turned around, "Almost forgot."

Whether she cared or not, and she really didn't care, leaving whatever remained of the stupid mugger in the middle of the alleyway was asking for trouble. Especially on a world like Lindblum. So, almost as an afterthought to what she'd done, Nui raised the same hand which had sliced the pig in human clothing to countless ribbons. She grasped the power within her beating heart. With a sweep of her arm and provocation of magic, flames tinted purple and pink danced around her fingers.

"Fira."

A few moments later, Nui strolled out of the alleyway, prim and perfect, not a drop of blood or rain on her clothes and a pile of soot flowing into the sewers, "Now, back to business."

It was late, but if she hurried, she could still catch the Jabberwock exhibit.

How Satsuki managed to slay such an awful beast didn't matter. This was her day off! DiZ was studying some of the lesser Nobodies she'd captured. And with nothing else to do, she'd decided to do some sightseeing. Seeing the Jabberwock up close and personal would be a great change of pace. And yet, despite being curious, taking pictures of the creature wasn't as interesting as figuring out how Sora found a Keyblade.

And certainly not as interesting as the whispers inside her heart.

As if someone, somewhere, knowingly committed one of the ultimate taboos.

Her expression, for a moment impossible to catch, darkened.

"Not yet," and just like that, everything was fine, "Gotta stay focused."

Smiling beneath her umbrella, dainty yet lethal fingers holding onto the pink shaft, Nui Harime turned on her heel.

"Now that Ryuko's wrapped things up," proceeding back the way she came, a skip to her step and laughter fading into the storm, she smirked, "Things are about to get interesting."

Last edited: Apr 24, 2020

Re:Mind [Héritage: Première]

Re:Mind [Héritage: Première]

"ACHOO!!!"

There was something about Twilight Town - well, she didn't know what it was, just that there was something. She'd never been there, of course. Saïx said it was only a matter of time before she would leave the castle. Which was exciting! Finally! A mission! But listening to Roxas describe the amazing world made her want to sneak out of the castle and see it with her own eyes. And buy more sea-salt ice cream. The same flavor Axel brought her the other day. A desert both salty and sweet. Which was really strange. When Axel gave them both sea-salt ice cream because they trained so hard without complaining, it had been the first time she'd eaten it. And experienced the horrible sensation that was brain freeze.

Yet Xion couldn't shake the feeling that wasn't true.

Maybe she'd had a lot of ice cream before losing her heart?

"ACHOO!!!"

Again, she sneezed. And again, Xion sniffled. Sneezing was annoying. But not as annoying as not remembering anything. Who was she? What happened to her? Did she have parents or a sister. Or maybe a brother? How did she lose her heart? It had to be something horrible. Maybe she was fighting a giant monster or protecting someone important from an army of Heartless?

"ACHOO!!!"

But no matter the reason, she was content. Not happy, since Nobodies couldn't feel emotions. She had friend who were... well, unique was a word. Larxene was a mean witch. Demyx thought he was a great musician when he really, really wasn't. Lexaeus was fold

of puzzles and games. Luxord gambled over everything. Zexion enjoyed his fermented soybeans. Axel wanted everybody to know who he was. Saïx hated everybody equally. And Xigbar acted like he had a dark and terrible secret he didn't want to share with anyone.

"ACHOO!!!"

The slowly melting ice cream almost slipped out of her fingers.

"ACHOO!!!"

"What's wrong?" a half-eaten, slightly melted popsicle, stuck out of Roxas's mouth. Sitting on the precipice of madness, which everybody called the Naught's Skyway, overlooking the darkened city beneath the castle, he waited until Xion finished sneezing before asking, or rather mumbling, around the sweet yet salty treat, "Don't tell me Zexion's cooking again."

"Oh, it's nothing," sniffing, Xion stared over the edge of the Naught's Skyway, nose runny and blue eyes ringed by eight grooves slightly watery from the unexpected bout of heavy sneezing, "Just felt like sneezing, I guess."

A couple of Dusks wandered behind them.

Xion didn't know what they were saying.

But one of them had a marker.

And they were heading towards Xigbar's room.

"Hey," a thick dollop melted dairy treats trickled onto her fingers, "Does it have a name?"

"A name?" Roxas chewed on the question, watching the Dusks vanish around the corner with the strangest inkling he should know what they were up to.

"You know, your Keyblade," Xion's expression tightened in such a way that people who didn't know she was a Nobody and couldn't feel anything might think she was embarrassed and not contemplating something very important.

The second newest member of the Organization shrugged, "Never really thought about it," only for realize what Xion was suggesting, where she was going and why her face deepened into an awkwardly red hue nearly matching the right-swept highlight in her hair, "Hang on, don't tell me you - "

Xion wished she could pull her hood over her head, crawl into a dark hole and hide from the world.

"It's just... well..." why had she asked Roxas something so bizarre? A Keyblade was a Keyblade. That's what Xemnas told them. That's what everyone said. Keyblades had the power to free hearts captured by Heartless. But why did her Keyblade look different than Roxas's? His was elegant and simple. Hers was sharp and dangerous. Night and day. Two things which couldn't be any more opposite if they tried, "... we both have Keyblades, so giving them names make sense, right?"

"A name, huh?" repeating the question once more, and then another time inside his head, Roxas finished the last of his sea-salt ice cream. Naming his Keyblade? He'd never thought about doing something like that. It didn't feel wrong. No, it felt... right. But what would he call it? It needed to be cool. Something everyone would recognize. An awesome name. One nobody would forget. Only one problem, "Sounds great! But I'm not so good with names."

Xion's embarrassment faded.

"So it might take me a while to come up with one" smiling gently, Roxas slouched forward.

And that was the truth.

Bringing out his Keyblade was a piece of cake.

But naming it?

If he had time maybe he could come up with something.

"How about you?" as Xion fidgeted, seemingly holding back a terrible secret own and failing miserably, he asked, "You have something in mind?"

The last bit of sea-salt ice cream slipped off Xion's popsicle, falling into the darkness below.

"Yeah," unlike Roxas's Keyblade, her Keyblade was red. And not ordinary red, but deep red. Almost the color of blood. Which, Xion mulled, matched the black highlights curling around the handle. There were other things. A grip resembling the handles of a scissors. A keychain in the shape of a four-pointed star. Jagged wings that looked sharp enough to slice through metal yet couldn't so much as give her a paper cut. It looked threatening. No wonder Xigbar had acted so weird when she showed him. Or maybe it was because she'd almost whacked him across the face, "... Senketsu."

"Senketsu?" the word didn't quite roll off Roxas's tongue, "What's that mean?"

"Don't know," Xion muttered, more to assure herself than anything, "It just sounds right."

But why did Senketsu sound right?

Were they someone from her past?

Xion didn't know.

And maybe she'd never know.

Oblivious to Xion's increasingly negative train of thought, Roxas repeated the strange name, sounding out each syllable, "So,

Senketsu, huh?"

"Stupid, isn't it?"

"Not at all!" Roxas smiled, blowing away Xion's expectations without saying anything, "It's great! Way better than anything I can think of. Oh man, if Axel wasn't busy, I know he'd say the same thing!" it took him a moment. Maybe two. But remembering who they were talking, Roxas's enthusiasm deflated, "Ugh, who am I kidding? He'd probably find something to argue about. Or say Senketsu sounded stupid. But in a nice way!"

"A nice way?" repeating Roxas's excuse as if it made sense, Xion laughed into her hand, the wooden stick labeled 'WINNER' forgotten for the moment, "That does sound like him."

Last edited: Apr 26, 2020

Re:Mind [Soldat: Première]

Re:Mind [Soldat: Première]

"You're a soldier?"

"Soldier? I'm an honest to goodness certified hero!" proud of the honor, plus the certificate back home, even if it was nothing more than a piece of papyrus that said what everybody already knew, he countered the ridiculous question by jabbing a thumb against his chest, "You're looking at a hero, first class! Zack Fair, at your service!"

Perched on a stack of something or another, surrounded by half-finished houses that almost looked like a cozy little town if she closed her eyes and blocked out the noise, the recently rescued Mrs. Gamagori, although she really liked using her original name whenever around Satsuki and Ryuko, followed Zack's introduction with bathed breath and imagination going a mile a second. Who would've thought a hero - a certified hero - would talk to her? She had so many questions! But she couldn't go with him. Which was a shame. Because everyone was still talking about her long kidnapping vacation. Especially her Shnookums. And remembering his manly tears made her want to cry.

But there wasn't enough time for crying!

She had to stay strong!

For Ryuko!

"Are you sure you're a hero?" blinking slowly yet deeply, Mako's head tilted slightly to the right, "Because your sword is awfully small."

"The size of a sword doesn't matter," the blade on his back had seen much better days. Dents and cracks from fighting off Cerberus when Hades sent his little pet into Thebes to lure out Herc. Not to mention

at least a dozen other mythical encounters stretching over the last ten years. But a hero's true strength didn't come from their sword. Embrace your dreams and protect your honor. Stand by your friends. Do that and even if you had a toothpick, you could take down the Titans themselves, "It's the size of your heart that really counts."

Mako nodded.

That made perfect sense.

"Hey - " rolling her tongue back and forth, she asked, " - you here on a mission?"

"Can't say much, I'm afraid," content with moving on from the not-so-standard introduction, Zack settled back into his normal serious mode. Well, it wasn't that serious. More friendly than funny. The attitude of a first-class hero, "But it would be really helpful if you could tell me where I could find Ryuko."

"She's saving the worlds, of course!"

it sounded ludicrous. Fantastical. Imaginative. And some other words. Nobody believed her. Not even Ira. Well, Satsuki did. But that was because they were sisters. And sisters shared everything! But in her heart, Mako remembered feeling something incredible. A feeling impossible to describe. For a moment lasting somewhere between one second and how long she needed to eat a well-balanced breakfast, somewhere in the universe, Ryuko had started doubting herself. She didn't know where or when. Or how or why. But with some helpful encouragement and pushing as much happiness and light through the darkness, Mako remembered feeling the same happiness and confidence from Ryuko she remembered always happened right before Ryuko did something amazing!

"Actually, she's already finished saving the worlds," hopping onto sandbags filled with concrete and assorted stuff she wasn't allowed to open, Mako sandals slipped against her feet as she stared at the setting sun, "We're just waiting for her to come back."

Zack didn't know what, if anything, to say.

Something about the way Mako talked suggested she wasn't lying. Exaggerating? Well, Ryuko was a Keyblade Master. But he'd travelled across the universe on a cramped ship barely large enough to stretch his legs, fought Heartless every step of the way, avoided the occasional asteroid, gotten lost twice and nearly crashed into a swirling vortex of darkness.

"So..." squatting to get the blood flowing, he rubbed the muscles between his neck and shoulder, "... you wouldn't happen to know when she'll get back?"

"Why does it matter to you?"

The voice was serious. Direct. Focused. Stern. Humorless.

Clack! Clack!

For some bizarre reason, Zack felt himself standing a little straighter.

"Mankanshoku," her heeled boots stopped at arm's length from the man. Far enough that she could unsheathe Muramasa if, or when, violence became necessary. But close enough that his greater stature made drawing his own weapon exceptionally difficult. Cold, steel blue eyes observed every conceivable inch of his body. He was a seasoned fighter. The scars suggested recklessness or experience. He held himself with some measure of arrogant. Or perhaps pride. Her brows knitted together at the thought, a familiar frown as she adjusted her footing and subtly moved her right hand across her chest.

"I've been looking for you," confessing the utter falsehood as if it was the truth, Satsuki's tone momentarily softened, "Gamagori was worried when you didn't show up for dinner."

"Oh my gosh! I missed dinner!?"

She did not need to embellish the story with superfluous details before Mako raced down the street, running around and through people.

Leaving her alone with him.

"Now - " without neither hesitation or reluctance, Satsuki allowed the man the full brunt of her attention, " - who are you?"

Zack flinched. Boy, what sort of hell did he walk himself into? It was like staring down a god. As if one wrong move would be the end of everything. This had to be a mistake. It wasn't like he did anything wrong. He just needed to explain everything. Once he did that, everything would turn out fine. Still, that didn't mean he wasn't slightly concerned by the woman's hand inching towards her sword, "Zack Fair. Hero, first class. And you are?"

The woman's expression somehow softened and hardened, an impossibility matched by her curt response, "Satsuki Kiryuin."

"Right," Zack nodded. This was going better than expected. Ten seconds and he was still breathing. Maybe Satsuki just took everything too seriously? Whatever the reason, he shifted back into 'serious mode, "I'm here on official hero business. From Zeus himself. See?"

His heart dropped when he patted down his pants.

Then his shirt.

And then Satsuki was holding an immaculate scroll engraved with golden ink, leaving him speechless.

"Ugh, great," thoroughly embarrassed, Zack wilted as Satsuki tossed him the scroll, "Guess you already read it, huh?"

"Why does Zeus wish to speak with Ryuko?" her ancient Greek wasn't perfect, but it was adequate to read the language and spot

even the most laughable addendum in fine print.

"Alright, long story short - you ever hear of a kid called Sora?" Zack didn't get an answer. The awkward silence and Satsuki's unflinching gaze said enough. Both answering his question and leaving him worried things weren't going better than expected, "Anyway... Sora tell you what happened?"

"Some detail, yes," Satsuki acquiesced.

"Well, that's why I'm here," shaking his head, Zack folded his arms and grimaced, "The guy everybody thought was behind the attack - Hades, Zeus's brother - claims he's innocent."

"And you believe him?" it was one of the most laughable comments Satsuki had heard in years.

"Not a chance," his own experience with the Lord of the Dead still firmly entrenched in his thoughts, Zack forced a smile, "You couldn't pay me enough to trust him," which faded away as he tilted his head backwards, "And that's the problem. It's one thing to sic the Nemean Lion on Herc. But the coliseum is different. There are rules. Rules not even Hades can break."

Satsuki wasn't nearly as convinced as Zack sounded, "Are you sure?"

"Definitely," Zack motioned with his hand before sighing, Man, on man. Talking to Satsuki was exhausting, "Not even Hades can lie to Apollo."

"The god of truths," if there was evidence proclaiming the God of the Underworld's innocence in such a sensitive matter, it would be the word of someone whose presence prevented lies, including those by omission.

"But that's not why I'm looking for Ryuko. Err, sorry. Zeus wants to speak with Ryuko," Zack lowered his voice, "This guy - Exdeath. He

had help. Someone wearing a coat just like whoever attacked the coliseum ten years ago."

Thick eyebrows furrowed at the additional piece of information Sora hadn't told Merlin.

Or far likely, hadn't known.

"It's probably how he escaped," momentarily distracted by something in the distance - and missing the realization dawning in Satsuki's eyes - Zack continued, "After Sora helped Herc kick his ass, Exdeath's partner caused a distraction. A flash of light. An explosion of darkness. And by the time anyone knew what happened, all that was left was his empty armor."

As butterflies circulated in the depths of Satsuki's stomach, something she had not experienced for as long as she could remember, she glanced aside, a breath slowly passing between her lips. Now she understood Zeus's interest in Ryuko. The god sought information. Ten years ago, in a match spurned by Hades manipulating Ryuko's desperation and love, her sister confronted someone concealing themselves within a black coat. The same individual who assisted Xehanort at the Keyblade Graveyard and whose temporal magic was not something to be ignored.

And with the intruder she'd fought a few days before Sora absconded with his Gummi Ship?

If they were working together, Xehanort was no longer content hiding behind stolen bodies and Heartless.

Ansem: Seeker of Darkness?

How arrogant.

"I see," and truly, she did see the answer drawing closer by the second, "However, the man who called himself Exdeath is nothing more than imposter," Satsuki did not speak anything but the

unvarnished truth. Merlin might have convinced Sora that Exdeath couldn't possibly have returned from the darkness. But after Sora left, the sorcerer headed straight towards Mad Madam Mim's residence, wherever that was, "The original Exdeath was banished to the realm of darkness by Merlin decades ago."

"You sure?" Zack had no reason to doubt Satsuki. And yet, "He could have come - "

"And destroyed by Mad Madam Mim when he reemerged a few years later," Satsuki finished, interrupting Zack mid-sentence.

The silence was deafening.

Unnervingly so.

"Well, ain't that perfect," the truth crashed upon Zack's weary shoulders. An imposter? Man, when it rained, it poured, "Back to square one, I guess."

"Their accomplice," whether or not Zak was bothered by the truth was utterly irreverent in Satsuki's mind, "What did they look like?"

"Can't say. Nobody got a good look at their face," a loud bang, the result of something crashing to the ground several blocks away, followed by someone screaming at someone else about being careful, went unnoticed by the proud hero, "Just a woman wearing a bright pink coat. Maybe blonde hair. Other than that? Sorry."

Satsuki's heart skipped a beat.

Her eyes imperceptibly widened before immediately narrowing.

"I see," releasing the tension building throughout her body, she closed her eyes, curling a bang of hair behind her ear with nonchalance afforded by practice, "Thank you," and without another word, she breathed. Her pulse steadied. Swirling thoughts

straightened until nothing remained but the objective staring them down, "You may inform Zeus the problem shall be taken care of."

If that was the resolution Zack expected, his sudden lurch forward was confusing, "Hang on - "

"The woman you described shall face justice, make no mistake," in no mood for insubordination over such a delicate matter, Satsuki interrupted Zack before he finished. She did not preach neutrality. Nor dispassion. Not when it came to anything involving her. Zack was no different. The only difference being he had no idea what awaited him if, or when, he found out who - or rather what - orchestrated the assault which nearly killed Sora and Hercules, "But not by your hands."

"Wait just a moment!"

Before Satsuki could walk away, Zack hurriedly stepped in front of her, "You know who she is, don't you?"

"[Know is a very sensitive word](#)," if the truth was what she thought it was, questions needed to be answered. If she survived, why did she wait so long? Even her patience when it came to revenge was limited. And why stalk Sora across the worlds? Wonderland... the jungle... and Thebes? Did she intend on enacting revenge by proxy against Ryuko? The questions clung upon her tongue without recourse. Yet without raising her voice more than a decibel, Satsuki walked around Zack, eyes barely meeting his own.

Clack! Clack!

"I could be wrong."

Clack! Clack!

"But if I'm not - "

Clack! Clack!

" - the person you've described won't fall so easily."

Clack! Clack!

She knew better. Perhaps better than anyone besides Ryuko how dangerous Nui could be. The power of a Keyblade only made things exponentially more difficult. Not impossible but far more problematic than she wished. And she knew, firsthand, what the Grand Couturier did to those who crossed her path, interfered with her 'fun' or proved themselves worthy of her love. A phrase which still evoked revulsion in the deepest pit of her stomach. Yet that intimate knowledge was why Satsuki stopped halfway across the empty plaza and looked over her shoulder at the hero desiring far more than she could grant, "You are undoubtedly skilled. But make no mistake - if you confront this woman, she will kill you."

Clack! Clack!

"Hey!" Zack tried to force another word in edgewise, but it was like shouting into the wind.

Lowering his arm as Satsuki walked towards Hollow Bastion, leaving him wondering what happened, he scratched his temple, torn between following Ryuko's sister until she explained everything or standing around like an idiot. She obviously knew something. But why not tell him? Did she really believe he'd throw himself into danger like an idiot? Was the hooded woman really that dangerous? He didn't know. And that bothered him more than anything.

"Terrific..." settling on a third option - sarcastic grumbling - he squatted on the ground, shoulders slumped and thoughts racing, "[... why does it feel like I'm being left out of the loop?](#)"

Author's Note

Before anyone asks, yes. I've already hinted at Zack still being around (See Chapter 12.3).

Last edited: Apr 29, 2020

Chapter 18.4

BEEP! BEEP!

She couldn't remember *how* it happened.

BEEP! BEEP!

But they pulled it off.

BEEP! BEEP!

The door to darkness was closed.

BEEP! BEEP!

Mako and Satsuki and everybody were safe.

BEEP! BEEP!

That was all that mattered.

BEEP! BEEP!

"Ugh..."

Consciousness returned not so much immediately, but piece by piece. Her arms and legs tingled. She was hungry, tired and other feelings too difficult to describe. She felt something attached to her chest and wrist. Slowly opening her eyes, greeted by bright sterile white light that made her want to go back to sleep, Ryuko forced herself to stay awake. Mouth dry and feeling like she'd gone ten rounds against Beatrix without a Keyblade, she took her first look around the room and promptly groaned.

A hospital.

Great.

"... what happened?"

Her voice sounded deeper than normal, which was probably because her head felt like someone stuffed it with cotton. But a sore throat and a headache were the least of her problems at the moment. Resting her head against the pillow made of itchy plastic and scratchy linen, blanket pulled up to her chin and machine next to the bed beeping over and over without stopping, Ryuko focused on what she could remember. They'd closed the door to darkness. She told Donald and Goofy to watch Mako. Gilgamesh saved Aqua. Sora and Mickey locked the door to darkness good and tight.

Then nothing.

Just weird sensations of falling into emptiness.

Opening her eyes for the second time since regaining consciousness, Ryuko blew the messier-than-normal hair off her face and looked out the nearby window. It was difficult seeing through the cheap blinds, but wherever she was, it was in the middle of a city. A *modern* city. San Fransokyo? No, could it be... her world? Hope swelled inside her chest only to quickly falter. No, she couldn't get her hopes up. Even if Mickey had been onto something about the worlds returning if the door to darkness was closed, for all she knew, this was a modern-looking world.

"Damn it," Ryuko bit the inside of her cheek.

She hated hospitals. Because going to the hospital usually meant tests. And tests involved needles. And she *hated* needles more than anything - including Nui Harime. But before she could sit up, yank the stickers off her chest and wrist, find her stuff, sneak over to the window and figure out an escape plan, Ryuko noticed something on the wall. It looked like one of those inspirational posters Mako collected. Only instead of a kitten or puppy doing something cute, there was a really friendly-looking cyclops screaming his lungs out.

Remember!

A scream a day keeps the doctor away!

"A scream a... what?" nothing about the poster made sense, "The hell does that mean?"

The door opened.

And Ryuko wondered if she'd hit her head.

It was a nurse. *She* was a nurse. Everything from the waist up looked almost human... ish from a distance if you ignored three reptilian eyes, no nose or ears, dark purple skin and blue hair. But before the waist was nothing but tentacles. Ten of them. Moving like legs, carrying the nurse into her room and around empty beds without needing her to look up from the pad in her slightly claw-tipped fingers. Oh, and one of those standard white nurse uniforms. But she couldn't feel any darkness.

Not a trace.

"Oh!"

The woman - err, monster - gasped in the same sort of way Mako's mom had always gasped, "You're awake!?"

"Err..." dumbfounded as the nurse shuffled towards her bed with a disturbing suckling sound, Ryuko didn't know what to say as well-practiced hands examined the beeping machine reading her pulse. So, a monster. Which probably meant *more* monsters. Some people would be scared. But friendly monsters were probably number ninety-eight out of one hundred on the list of weird shit she'd seen over the years, "Where am I?"

"The hospital, deary," finished with whatever she was doing, the nurse shuffled away, the tips of her tentacles curling inwards, "Can you remember anything? How about your name?"

Ryuko licked her lips, ignoring how her teeth felt sharper than normal, "... Ryuko."

"Oh, that's quite the special name," jotting something onto the pad with a pencil that didn't seem standard, the nurse shuffled around the bed, every tentacle moving independently *and* collectively, "How are you feeling this morning, Ryuko?"

Half paying attention to the game of twenty questions and half wondering if she could escape without the nurse realizing anything, Ryuko heard sheet ripping around her fingers.

Damn, since when were her nails sharp as claws?

"I'm fine," against the nurse's advice, Ryuko sat up and yanked the blanket sideways, "But I gotta get -"

The rest of whatever she intended on saying devolved into an inhuman gurgle.

"Guah!?"

Ryuko felt the *moment* her heart stopped.

Her skin was *green*.

She closed her eyes, hoping this was nothing but a hallucination. But when she opened them, nothing had changed. Her hands... her arms... her entire body was a sickening and familiar shade of monstrous green that haunted her nightmares. Blood didn't drip from her skin like water. It didn't gush from gaping wounds. It didn't burn everything it touched. She didn't feel hot or angry or furious. But she could still see it. She could still *feel* Senketsu panicking as his Life Fibers became knotted, twisted and entwined with her own. She could still *hear* his screams alongside her hate-filled roars. Everything came back in a flood of emotions and memories.

The sickening nausea bubbling within her roiling stomach made her want to puke.

Acting purely on autopilot and instinct, Ryuko grabbed the nearest reflective surface - a metal bowl - within arm's reach. Four-fingered hands ending in razor-sharp claws. Four-toed clawed feet. Curled horns jutting out of her disheveled hair. And a mouth full of fangs sharp enough to chew through solid metal.

She looked like a monster.

She looked like *that* monster.

But her eyes... her eyes were a familiar blue.

And she felt *fine*.

No bloodlust. No desire to destroy everything.

She was still Ryuko Matoi.

"Calm down, deary," the nurse, not knowing *why* Ryuko was panicking, rested a purple arm on her wrist, "You're safe here."

Ryuko collapsed back onto her pillow, black and red hair spreading around her face as she physically forced herself to calm down, "Sorry," the apology came across as an angry growl mixed with a monstrous snarl, "Just... remembered something."

As nerve-wracking panic faded into a low simmer in the furthest depths of her heart, Ryuko closed her eyes. Alright, so she'd turned into *that* thing. Or something close. So what? She might look different on the outside. But on the inside, she was still herself. Letting out a heavy sigh, which sounded more like an evil gargling hiss that should've scared nearly everyone but left the nurse unfazed, Ryuko collapsed onto the bed. Mickey and Riku were missing. She looked like a monster. And her nurse was a monster friendlier than half the people who lived on her block.

That settled it.

This was one of *those* worlds.

Relief washed over her heart like a tidal wave. And for a moment, Ryuko found herself almost laughing. Beatrix had warned her about these worlds. Strange places where the normal rules were twisted in strange and unexpected ways. But it was temporary. Whatever magic transformed her into a monster would fade once she returned to the Lanes Between. But in the meantime, she was stuck looking like the worst mistake of her goddamn life.

She could live with that.

BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP!

BEEEEEEEEEEEEPPPPPP!!!!

"Oh crap!"

Like a coiled spring, Ryuko leapt out of the bed, sending sheets, blankets and pillows flying everywhere, "Where are they!?"

Startled by her patient's unexpected meltdown after several minutes of relative tranquility, the nurse nevertheless retained her composure. She merely blinked, tentacles instinctively suckling on the floor as doctors, residents and other nurses across the ward stopped what they were doing and looked in Ryuko's general direction, "What's wrong, deary?"

"My scissors!" heart beating a mile a minute and something resembling sweat pooling on her cheeks and chin, Ryuko searched underneath the bed and inside the bathroom for what mattered more than anything except Mako and Satsuki, opening drawers in the hopes they might've shrunk, "They're red! About... this... big!" but

not finding them, she motioned with her hands - or, err, claws, drawing a rough outline of the Rending Scissors, "I had two of them!"

Despite her patient's reflexive scaring, which was terrifying and quite impressive, the nurse barely flinched at the sharpened teeth and claws, "Scissors?" repeating the question while sliding towards Ryuko's chart, she searched for who was on call when Ryuko was admitted an hour before midnight. And with Ryuko watching her every move like a nervous predator waiting to strike, pressed a small red button next to the bed, "Doctor Michaels, can you come to Room 456?"

Ryuko didn't know who or what to expect when he walked into the room.

But it wasn't someone *bigger* than Gamagori.

He looked like someone painted the abominable snowman alternating reddish orange stripes. And gave him four eyes. And made him over ten feet tall and built like a tank. And had him walk through the door with a smile showing way too many teeth, thick-rimmed glasses and a lab coat, shirt and polka-dotted tie.

"RAAAAAAARRGGGHH!!!!"

And then tried to scare her half to death, "Is that how you get your kicks?"

"I like to loosen up around lunch," examining the mess strewn around the room while noting his patient's witty yet dry sense of humor, Anthony Marcus Michaels heartily laughed at the joke before turning towards the nurse waiting with an uncharacteristically serious look in her eyes, "What happened, Linda?"

"Our patient wants to know what happened to her... scissors," the nurse - Linda - explained.

"Scissors, you say?" the doctor frowned, which resembled a snarl to the untrained eye. As a monster possessing rather formidable size and scare potential yet lacking the courage to scare children, he knew about custom appliances. Chairs, beds, utensils. Steel-wool toothbrushes. Nothing too unusual for monsters such as himself, "Yes... the monster who brought you here was carrying something resembling scissors."

Hope momentarily blossomed in Ryuko's heart, "Where are they?"

Anthony Marcus Michaels shook his head, "After the good monster who found you gave his statement to the police, I do believe they confiscated your novelty scissors."

"Novelty?" Ryuko's brain sputtered at the Rending Scissors being called novelty before immediately re-panicking, "Confiscated!?"

"No need to worry, once you're discharged, you can head over to Monstropolis Police and get them back," grabbing the chart off the wall, Anthony Marcus Michaels flipped through the pages, his gorilla-like fingers more dexterous than she expected, "Hmm, your vitals are stable. Good scare reaction. But I'd like to keep you overnight for further observation. Just to err on the safe side," checking something on the chart, he turned to Linda, "I have to finish my rounds. Can you inform the police our patient is conscious and able to provide a -"

["The CDA?"](#)

"What's going on?"

It sounded like an army was marching through the hospital.

Monsters of all shapes and sizes, decked in yellow hazmat gear with three red lights over their faces and vacuum-like devices on their back, rappelled down the windows. They arrived via helicopter and trucks, which Ryuko *heard* screeching to a halt outside the hospital. Hundreds of CDA agents stormed up the stairs three at a time,

running through the wards and scaring patients, doctors and nurses half to death before eventually storming into her room.

"Secure the perimeter," as the door was nearly kicked off its hinges, one of the monsters with eyestalks and eight-fingered hands, their hazmat suit showing 00003, ordered.

"Perimeter has been secured, sir," another monster, 00110, responded.

"I want this entire building quarantined," ignoring the three monsters already in the room, one of whom was growing increasingly impatient by the second, the lead agent slashed an inhuman hand across his neck before pointing it towards the floor, "Nobody leaves until headquarters gives the all-clear!"

"The CDA!?" it was as if someone flipped a switch in the doctor's heart. Faster than Ryuko could fathom, Anthony Marcus Michaels went from surprised and fearful to irritated, "What is the MEANING of this!?"

"We've received word of a possible 4638," the lead agent countered, "Stand aside and do not attempt to interfere."

Linda gasped, "A 4638!?"

"That's preposterous!" Anthony Marcus Michaels scoffed at the mere assumption such a horrible scenario would unfold inside the hospital, "There are no *human children* here!"

If he intended on answering the doctor's question, 00003 did so in an alien language independent of spoken speech as another agent rushed into Ryuko's room, audibly panting inside their hazmat suit and carried a large device that slowly beeped every other second. With almost bated breath, they watched the agent carefully sweep the hospital room from top to bottom, searching each and every nook and cranny for any possible signs of contamination. The bathroom

and windows weren't spared any expense. Even the ceiling tiles, machines and the poster on the wall was examined.

"All clear, sir," the agent, 00343, saluted with one of his four stubby arms, "Contamination levels are zero and steady."

"Continue looking," 00003 answered, "I don't want any monsters leaving until the building's secured."

"As much as we *appreciate* the CDA," the irritation contained within Dr. Michaels' voice was palpable. And even if they were agents, a handful of monsters backed away, an assortment of devices pointed at the doctor, "I'm consulting a patient. So, if you'd kindly leave..."

"What patient?" 00003 asked.

["The one - "](#) Anthony Marcus Michaels turned around and noticed, against all odds, the patient who'd been standing next to Linda but a few moments ago had somehow disappeared when nobody was looking. And there was a note taped to the open window, which should have been impossible because the windows *didn't* open.

MY DEEPEST APOLOGIES FOR

LEAVING WITHOUT PERMISSION

~RYUKO MATOI~

Chapter 18.5

*Imagine Ryuko teaching at Monsters University. Not so much an academic teacher. She doesn't have the patience for that. But a practical teacher. Someone who teaches students *how* to scare people. Not with techniques. But with flat-out intimidation.*

"Good morning, Monstropolis. It's 11:35 A.M. Temperature's a chilly 52 degrees with a chance of scattered storms later this evening..."

The radio fell to the floor, knocking out the batteries and interrupting the late morning weather report when music loud enough to peel paint from the walls shook the apartment.

"Young lady!"

Throwing the half-folded sorority shirt onto the table, nearly scattering the Monstropolis Daily News across the kitchen, Marian Hardedge stormed towards the source of her mounting frustration, "Turn down that music!"

On the far side of the apartment, through a door covered top to bottom with heavy metal monster bands, her daughter shouted something childish.

An argument developed.

Someone growled.

Another monster roared.

The apartment shook again.

The music stopped.

Huffing and puffing and slightly out of breath, Marian Hardedge returned to the kitchen, stereo nearly crushed between her claws

and one hundred kilograms of scales, muscles and motherly fury. But the stereo - and the CD she'd pulled out of it - was quickly forgotten as she stomped towards the open window, the hastily scribbled note explaining why the fruit in the bowl on the table, the newspaper and her daughter's shirt were missing.

PLEASE FORGIVE ME!!

I'LL PAY YOU BACK LATER!

A few minutes later, down the street and several blocks away, a piece of mutated fruit fell from Ryuko's mouth, nearly hitting a monster made out of tentacles, eyes and teeth.

The shirt didn't quite fit right. It was a little tight around her chest, loose on her stomach, stopped halfway to her knees, was goth - and she meant *goth* - way beyond ridiculous and almost to the point she wondered if whoever bought it was trying a little too hard to gain their mom's attention and had 'HSS' stamped across the front in big white letters. She didn't like anything about it. But it was better than walking around completely naked.

Or worse - a cheap hospital gown.

"Geez," mumbling words and sounds around another fruit resembling a prickly apple smelling of old books and gym socks yet tasted sweet, perched six stories about the busy streets of Monstropolis, clawed feet dangling over the edge and torn-apart gown stuffed somewhere in a dumpster, Ryuko browsed the newspaper, "Now I know why I don't read these."

Stocks. Weather. Local news.

Monsters University beating Fear Tech with a come-from-behind victory.

It was just so... *boring*.

"That pervert would've *loved* this place."

Juice dribbled down Ryuko's chin onto the newspaper as she flipped to the next page. Some monsters wore shirts and ties. Or the occasional hat. But no pants. Which wasn't different from half of her friends. Donald and a few others immediately came to mind. And it wasn't like monsters needed to wear pants. There wasn't anything 'hanging out.' And even if there were, so what? Shit, fighting half-naked didn't exactly leave her blushing and sputtering for random excuses. If it meant protecting everyone she cherished, she would fight completely in the buff without an ounce of embarrassment.

And yet, thinking about her old homeroom teacher and full-time pervert left a bad taste in her mouth, "I wonder what sort of monster he'd be?"

She pondered the question far longer than necessary.

"Eugh," grimacing as she tried - and failed, despite her best efforts - not imagining Mikisugi as a monster, Ryuko slammed her eyes shut, "That ain't something I needed to see."

A look of utmost disgust crossed her face as she grabbed another piece of fruit. Maybe if she stuffed it in her mouth, she'd stop thinking about the guy slowly stripping out of whatever little clothes he wore, light flashing from his nipples and crotch. But Ryuko didn't get the chance to eat the misshapen fruit resembling a mutated orange-green watermelon. Because something surfaced in her heart. Not so much a thought but a long-forgotten memory.

"Wait a sec..."

She involuntarily crushed the fruit between her claws.

Before Mako and Gamagori found a place of their own in the Residential District, she'd let her best friend bunk in her spare bedroom. And for the most part, life had been as normal as could be. Mako was Mako. Gamagori refused to leave the streets until he

found a steady job capable of supporting Mako. Satsuki was consulting Scrooge about something. Inumuta had yet to leave that so-called 'hellhole of a world.' Except for one night. Beatrix wanted to talk to her about something involving Xehanort's echoes. And Mako - again, because she was Mako - had decided to babysit one of her neighbor's kids.

The details were sketchy about *what* happened right after two thirty in the morning.

But it involved Mako throwing a desk through the kid's closet after he started screaming about a 'lizard monster.'

"Craaaaaap," Ryuko slouched forward. Great. Perfect. The one time she didn't believe Mako, it turned out to be true, "Now I gotta apologize."

And kick monster ass.

But vengeance could wait. After all, she was the bigger person. A Keyblade Master. A mature and respected woman. If, or rather when, she tracked down the bastard responsible for making her pay restitution for Mako going ape shit, there was a laundry list of complaints she was prepared to address one by one. Maybe she'd punch him. Maybe she'd let him try talking his way out of getting punched. Or maybe she'd blast his ass with fire and call it a day. She didn't know. And she probably wouldn't know until she found the guy.

A roar down the street... followed by another roar and laughter as both monsters greeted each other while nearly grinding traffic to a halt... drew Ryuko back to her new reality.

Letting out a huff that sounded more like a snarling hiss, she scratched her hair, claws bumping into horns resembling Senketsu's too much for her liking.

Even if she was still herself, the constant reminder was beginning to seriously wear on her nerves

But no matter how much she hated it, leaving wasn't an option.

Not without the Scissor Blades.

"The sooner I find them, the faster I can leave this place."

But that was far easier said than done. Her word as a Keyblade Master meant shit on this world. She was just another civilian, no more important than anyone else. If the police were anything like the Lindblum Guard, getting back the Scissor Blades was going to be a bureaucratic nightmare. Forms and questions up her ass. Who are you? How do we know you are who you say you are? Show some I.D. or whatever monsters used. Ugh! Breaking in and *stealing* them back would probably be easier than answering pointless questions.

The banana looking like someone puked on an orange was halfway to her mouth when darkness tore through existence, "I was wondering when you bastards were gonna show up."

Another burst of darkness.

Then countless more.

The newspaper fluttered out of her claws as she stood up, turned around and cracked her knuckles.

"Gotta say - "

Here it was, the unspoken 'perk' of wielding the Keyblade - no matter what she looked like, her heart was a freaking beacon to the Heartless, "I'm *really* glad you guys were stupid enough to think this was a good idea."

One of the Heartless didn't bother letting her finish.

Armor clanking and claws dripping with visceral darkness, the Heartless darted across the roof, intent on stealing her heart and the powerful light within. Dispassionate eyes harboring growing annoyance watched the creature rapidly close the distance. Her

muscle slowly but steadily coiled. Fangs peaked between bared lips. Claws scraped against concrete, shifting subtly as she adjusted her center of balance. And right before the vile creature reached her, Ryuko smashed her foot into its unsuspecting face. For a moment, she and the Heartless were caught in a deadly dance. One wrong move. One false step. One flinch. And the loser would die.

Or worse.

"Because I have shit to work through," but with a not-so-peaceful flex of her knee, Ryuko sent the Heartless crashing into several of its friends, "And I mean *a lot* of shit."

Threadcutter's keychain jingled as she swept the Keyblade onto her shoulder. Twenty-five Heartless. No, twenty-six. None of them dangerous or special. No casters except those little floating color-coded elemental bastards. She cracked her neck, first to the right and the left. This was freaking perfect. She escapes the realm of darkness, kicks the Cloud of Darkness's ass, saves the universe, wakes up in a monster hospital and immediately gets attacked by Heartless. Somewhere in the universe, someone was doing their best to fuck with her.

"So," taunting the Heartless, Ryuko growled as their numbers settled somewhere north of forty, "Who's first?"

Last edited: May 5, 2020

Re:Mind [Monstres]

Re:Mind [Monstres]

["Are you listening to yourself?"](#)

"I don't know why you think it's such a big deal."

"Not a big deal?" he couldn't believe what he was hearing. He must still be dreaming. That's right. He was in bed, imagining the last twelve hours. Any second now, he'd start dreaming about giant donuts and waffles, "Who are you and what have you done with the real James P. Sullivan?"

"I'm serious," James P. Sullivan shrugged as he closed the door. And then closed the other door, bypassing the parked car in front of their apartment, "I just did what any good monster would've done."

"What are you, a Dragon Scout?"

That they were even *having* this conversation boggled Mike Wazowski. It had been a great night. After a good day's work scaring children, they'd gone out for drinks at Marco's. Then it started raining. And pouring. And on the way back to their place, Sully happened to notice someone lying on the sidewalk, "We could've called the police! The hospital. But you had to carry her halfway across the city to Monstropolis General, stay until the police arrived, give a detailed statement and *then* walk all the way back! In the rain, might I add!"

"Well, if *someone* had let me drive - "

" - and get rain on leather seats? Don't make me laugh," brushing off the question like it was old milk, Mike rolled his eye, "But why Monstropolis General? That's the farthest hospital you could've picked."

"You're overreacting," a four-legged monster on a bike pedaled around Sully, waving with a tentacle while throwing newspapers with another. Yawning loudly, the scarer tried working out the annoying kink between his shoulders, "I'm sure you would have done the same thing."

Caught between the improbability and impossibility of his friend's terrible excuse, Mike didn't know where to begin, "Look at me, I'd break an arm trying to lift the sofa," the idea he could carry anyone several miles sounded positively ridiculous. Feeling the beginning of a migraine building behind his eye, he focused on the present. On the here and now. They had to go to work, scare children and go home. No more worrying about some random monster. But unfortunately, he possessed a conscience. And standing on the corner, foot tapping at the red cross light, he eventually and with great hesitation relented, "Did you at least get her name?"

"She was unconscious, Mike."

"Or why she was carrying novelty scissors?"

"Nope," Sully elongated the word before quickly pointing a finger at his friend, "And those things were anything but novelty," halfway through explaining himself, he caught the light changing green, "They were sharp. Really sharp."

"Did you find out *anything*?" shifting his lunch pail to his other hand, Mike groaned into his hand, "Maybe an address. Or where she worked."

"Well - " call it a hunch. Intuition. Or the good, old-fashion Sullivan family instinct. But picking a piece of breakfast out of his teeth, sully couldn't shake the feeling there was something strange going on, " - I think she's a scarer."

"A scarer?" grabbing a piece of fruit from the stand while flicking a coin over his shoulder, Mike stared at Sully like the guy just grew another head, "You're kidding me."

"I'm serious," Sully weakly defended himself, "I really think she's a scarer. You should have seen her, Mike. She really looked the part."

"Half the monsters in this city look the part! *He* looks the part!" Mike motioned, quite emotionally, towards a horned raptor-dinosaur with rows of teeth calmly drinking coffee while waiting for the next bus, "For all we know, she's a schoolteacher! Or barista! Or worse, a telemarketer!"

"I mean, she *looked* like a scarer," Sully clarified, "Trust me, after a couple of years on the job, you tend to know these things."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"If she is a scarer - and I'm not saying she is - she has to be working at Scream Industries or Fear Co.," refusing to accept Sully's explanation, Mike tried to come up with a reasonable alternative. Yet came up short. He didn't like it. And he'd never admit it. But Sully had a point. The woman being a scarer made too much sense. Why else would she wear that much black? Sure, it was raining, but not hard enough for a raincoat. And those scissors. They had to be part of her scaring gimmick. Something used to help scare children. It sounded like it made sense and yet he refused to believe the woman was a scarer, "Oh, don't tell me you're going to visit her?"

Sully gave a half-hearted shrug, "Like I said - I did what any good monster would've done."

"You know, buddy, you're too nice for your own good," walking through the gates of Monsters Inc., Mike could not help but shake his head and sigh, "One of these days, that's gonna come back and bite you in the behind."

Chapter 18.6

A heavily armored steel grey truck, six-wheeled chassis and turbocharged V8 scream-enhanced engine, barreled down the street, ignoring traffic signals and weaving around cars.

Hundreds of feet above the skyline, high enough that even the largest monsters resembled insects, Ryuko's chin tickled Threadcutter as she twisted her Keyblade's handles, narrowed her eyes and pushed forward. A sound lurking somewhere between a strained groan and monstrous hiss bubbled within the depths of her throat. Crystal blue eyes illuminated by the crimson radiance of her hair narrowed to pinpricks, both from annoyance and the wind blasting against her face. Goosebumps trickled down her arms and legs. At least, Ryuko hoped they were goosebumps. Despite looking that like *thing*, every reflective surface and mirror yet another unwanted reminder, her nauseating green skin was soft and smooth.

The sort of smooth she'd felt whenever Beatrix or Satsuki *forced* her to wear something woven from high-end and expensive as goddamn shit fabric.

Usually to one of Queen Garnet's or Regent Cid's formal galas.

Which seriously pissed her off.

Ten Minutes Earlier...

She had a plan.

Well, it was more like an idea.

Walk into the police station, politely ask for her Scissor Blades, bullshit any forms and excuses necessary to avoid awkward questions, falsify a few details such as her age, occupation and address and leave before anybody realized she didn't belong. And if that didn't work, use Threadcutter as a universal skeleton key to

unlock anything standing in her way, liberate the Scissor Blades and retreat to the Lanes Between. It wasn't a complicated plan. There wasn't anything that could go wrong except more Heartless appearing. Or someone recognizing her from the hospital. Or the monster who rescued her walking into the station for some unrelated reason.

But as she turned around a corner, nonchalantly sidestepping an orange gelatinous slug- who not only apologized but did so in an accent impossible to place - Ryuko realized retrieving her scissors might be harder than she'd originally thought.

"What the...?"

She couldn't have sounded more confused if she tried. It looked like something exploded. The entire street was cordoned off. As was the next. And the next. And the next. And the one after that. Buildings were covered with red and white tents. Helicopters like the ones at the hospital flew every which way overhead. And because she couldn't see anything thanks to monsters of all shapes and sizes standing shoulder to shoulder in the street, blocking her view, her mouth slowly began twitching in a very familiar fashion, "You gotta be kidding."

Everybody was talking.

But nobody knew shit.

"Of all the lousy..."

As the crowd thickened, Ryuko didn't know what to say, so she settled on something familiar. There was a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. A familiar sensation she remembered from her school days at Honnouji Academy. Something serious was going down. Something she probably needed to get involved with, whether she liked it or not. Focusing her patience while frowning in such a way that her expression twisted, exposing glistening fangs and a jaw far too wide for a normal person, she forced her way into the crowd,

murmuring 'excuse me' and 'pardon me' whenever she accidentally shoulder-checked another monster's tentacles, limbs or claws.

Upon reaching the front of the crowd, stomach bumping against the barricades thanks to a horned lizard-dragon wearing a tie and the upper half of a suit, her mouth twitched again.

"... shit."

Grey and yellow trucks with 'Child Detection Agency' surrounded the police station.

Monsters wearing the same yellow hazmat suits as the assholes who barged into her room back at the hospital patrolled the streets.

A voice similar enough to her own yet shifted to a slightly higher octave caressed her heart as she stood barely an arm's distance away from an agent carrying something more suited for deep sea diving. First the hospital. Now the police station. No doubt about it - the CDA or whatever the enigmatic bastards called themselves were searching for her. But why was the million Gil question. Don't interfere with a world's natural order any more than absolutely necessary. Precept number three or whatever of the Keyblade Master's handbook. Which she's always remembered right before saying 'screw the consequences' and doing what she knew was the right thing to do.

But she hadn't DONE anything except fight a few Heartless and steal twenty Gil worth of random shit she'd promised to pay back with interest.

Wait - it couldn't be THAT, could it?

"Geez," conflicted between sticking around and discovering the CDA's obsession with her and making a slow retreat, Ryuko was one of the few monsters who didn't flinch when several cops were escorted out of the station's front doors - some shaved and others wearing the same type of plastic cone people put on their dogs -

towards a vehicle resembling a shower inside a bathtub inside a closet, "Glad that ain't me."

"You said it," a green monster with two eyestalks, short legs and three-clawed arms agreed.

But Ryuko didn't hear him.

An agent emerged from the station. Followed by four more. All of them wearing far more protective equipment than their co-workers. Leaning on the barricade, blunted claws grasping the faded yellow and orange painted wood, cracks radiating from the point of contact and drawing the attention of a nearby CDA agent, who ordered her to back away until her glare caused him to reconsider his current lifestyle choices, Ryuko stared at the two containers being carried out of the station, yellow warning tape wrapped around dark metal shimmering metallic blue in the sunlight.

One contained the coat she'd worn inside the realm of darkness.

And the other had her goddamn Scissor Blades.

"Steady... steady..." a female monster, 00014 printed on her hazmat suit, motioned while backing away from the station.

"Say," holding one end of the second containment device, fog and water vapor turning the glass transparent, eight-fingered hands gripping two of the four handles, 00839 stared into the containment device, "You don't think these are actually scissors, do you?"

"Who knows," his partner, 00754, shrugged, "But they're dangerous. Never seen anything from the human world survive a level eleven decontamination without a scratch."

"Eh, let headquarters figure it out," 00839 grumbled, "The sooner they're out of my eyes, the better."

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Rapping her knuckles against the truck next to the mobile decontamination chamber, 00014 turned aside as agents took the human paraphernalia off their hands, "Headquarters, this is 00014 responding to the 2319 at Monstropolis Police Department. Decontamination was unsuccessful. Repeat. Decontamination was unsuccessful," the radio inside her suit blared static, "Recommend return to headquarters for deep containment and level nineteen decontamination. Copy, over?"

"Roger," a voice crackled after several seconds, "Proceed to headquarter for level nineteen decontamination and deep containment."

The Present...

"Alright," Ryuko's attempt at bolstering her self-esteem was hindered by the wind, which made anything except the loudest screams impossible to hear, "Time to end this!"

She had a plan.

Follow the truck, wait for it to reach wherever it was going, grab the Scissor Blades and leave.

Well, not so much a plan but an idea.

Satsuki composed plans like they were symphonies. Gamagori announced strategies with goddamn precision. Inumuta wrote multi-stage tactics far too convoluted to work and gave her a migraine just trying to remember. And Beatrix was creative when it came to devising ways to kick ass and take names. But not her. That wasn't who she was. She trusted in her gut. She was more of an idea's woman than a strategist or planner. The kind of person who came up with something on the fly and hoped it worked while improvising when shit went sideways. And while her ideas didn't always work, they worked more times than it didn't, which disproved Gamagori's theory that she was constantly betting against the house.

But screw him!

CRASH!!!

Time crashed to a screeching and painful halt. One moment the truck holding the Scissor Blades was barreling down the street. And the next? With a violent lurch, stammered cursing and feeling her stomach forcing its way up her throat, Ryuko yanked Threadcutter's handles and pulled to the right. Pulsing in shimmering outbursts resembling supernovas, cerulean light streaked beneath her Keyblade as it spun through the heavens above Monstropolis. Spittle flew between her fangs as Threadcutter's speed dropped from one hundred miles an hour to zero in two seconds flat, nearly causing her to black out.

But once the vertigo passed, Ryuko leaned over razor-sharp gold and ruby curves with hints of dark black painting peculiar angles, eyes focused on the truck crashed into a raging fire hydrant.

And the humanoid creatures surrounding it.

"Are those - "

She stopped herself when someone walked out of the darkness.

Even high above the ground, Ryuko could hear his whiny voice clear as day.

"Talk about invasion of privacy."

The miasma faded into nothingness as he waltzed onto the street, fingers strumming an unusually sized sitar, "You slack off a little too much and suddenly nobody trusts you."

His whining - or rather, pointed criticism- were accompanied by plucking Arpeggio's strings. A treble which resonated with the water roaring from the fire hydrant and pooling around the street, "Ugh, no wonder it's been so hard underachieving."

CLICK!!!

CLICK!!!

"Go! Go! Go!"

CLICK!!!

CLICK!!!

Before he'd taken three steps, several other trucks arrived on the scene. And with coordination that was almost impressive, dozens of monsters surrounded him, turning what should have been an easy mission into something far too tedious for a professional slacker such as himself. He was outnumbered and outmatched. Which *sucked*. Why did they have to send him? There were eleven - no, eight - people better suited for these sorts of missions. Xemnas didn't count. Xigbar probably would pull rank or claim he was too busy doing important organization stuff. Saïx was out of the question. And Vexen was too busy with his 'research' to lend a helping hand.

Wait - that was seven.

"Hands and tentacles above your heads!"

"On the ground! Now!"

"No sudden movements!"

"Drop the guitar!"

"Whoa now, let's not get ahead of ourselves," the mysterious cloaked man attempted, perhaps with a little more levity than expected when facing monsters armed to the claws and the feeling someone, somewhere, was watching him, "I know what this looks like, but this is just a *huge* misunderstanding!"

Instead of taking his advice, the monsters raised their weapons.

Electricity crackled on metallic prongs.

But he - and by he, Demyx meant himself, the Dancers he'd brought along for help and the music playing inside his head - was faster.

"Dance, water! Dance!"

The first note accomplished nothing. It was merely a precursor to the main event. The opening act. A warmup. An appetizer. As Demyx's fingers strummed Arpeggio with skill, mastery and precision earned through years of blood, sweat and tears - words that usually made him break out in hives - water bubbled and rippled. The transparent liquid condensed from nothingness. It froze midair above the broken fire hydrant, variously sized spheres and baubles pausing above shell-shocked monsters. It was easy. Almost too easy. Not that he was one to complain about anything being too easy. As a self-admitted underachiever and slacker, working twice as hard to do half as much work pretty much defined who he was.

"Time to party!"

Almost like rain falling from the heavens, more and more water materialized into existence. Faster than Larxene could insult his amazing taste in music, Demyx spun Arpeggio, plucked notes along the twelve-tone chromatic scale and paid no attention to the monsters finding themselves beaten senseless or otherwise incapacitated by a combination of water quavers and handsome clones, steaming geysers exploded from his feet in rippling patterns resembling guitar strings being plucked underneath a half-full glass of water and Dancers deciding to carry their own weight instead of standing around like pedestrians.

"Let's keep going!"

Another powerful chord and one of the trucks tipped backwards, courtesy of a bubbling pillar of water.

"Ha! Ha! Dance to the... wha-hey!?"

Reality crashed onto the emptiness inside Demyx's chest when one particularly irate Dancer, soaked to the bone and dripping wet, confronted him, "Oh... um..." unable to know what to say, he looked around for assistance, saw more drenched Nobodies, and slowly backed away, "... I'm sorry?"

The Dancer skated away without uttering a single word.

"C'mon, it was an accident!"

Demyx couldn't figure out why it was upset. It wasn't his fault they'd been standing in the wrong place, "Why am I always getting blamed?"

A drop of water hit his shoulder.

"Eh?"

Followed by a torrential downpour as the water he'd been manipulating and controlling until getting interrupted by the ungrateful Dancer fell upon him like a blanket.

"GAH! UGH!"

Coughing and sputtering, drenched to the bone with water soaking every square inch of him, Demyx's eye twitched as the lesser Nobodies laughed. And laughed. And laughed. A light tittering almost like wind chimes. Most Nobodies didn't talk. Because, well, they either lacked mouths or their lips were sewn shut. Which was gruesome. But they had personalities and dreams. Maybe not emotions or hearts, even if they could remember what emotions were like. Which came with some great perks. Controlling darkness was nice. Not having to worry about a Heartless stealing your heart was neat. And having employees able to do anything you wanted - up to and including chores and missions if Saïx didn't constantly watch over his shoulder - smoothed out the edges.

"Ugh, just let it go, Demyx."

He was almost finished.

For the first time in recorded history, he'd successfully completed a mission without anything going wrong. If it meant not listening to Saïx list everything he'd screwed up - numerically then alphabetically before asking Axel to repeat what he said - he could deal with a few treacherous Nobodies.

"Excuse me. Pardon me," with the musty smell of darkness filling his head and water dripping down his coat, Arpeggio dissipated into purple and black miasma as he casually stepped around unconscious and groaning monsters, "I'm just gonna step over here, if you don't mind..."

Demyx didn't know what was worse - Vexen putting bugs in his coats, Saïx ordering Vexen to put bugs in his coats or Vexen *stealing* his coats for some convoluted and insane scheme to track Ryuko Matoi's movements across the universe. Which was stupid. Seriously, it didn't make any sense. And if he couldn't figure out how the plan was supposed to work, Vexen probably didn't. Or did he? What if Ryuko refused to wear his favorite coat? Was Vexen too much of a genius to consider the obvious? And why did Saïx order him to retrieve his coat *and* tell him about the tracker stitched into the hem? Something happened. Some new and profound development everybody but him knew about.

Maybe Ryuko kicked the bucket.

Nah, he wasn't that lucky.

If he was, Xigbar, who loathed Ryuko with a passion usually reserved for whoever stole his lunch, would have celebrated.

Aware that he was on a time crunch where the Keyblade Master could appear at any moment to beat the snot out of him, Demyx stepped over a monster slumped against the truck and immediately felt his boots sink into a pothole several inches deep, filled to the brim with water, dirt and gunk he didn't want to imagine. Shuddering

to himself and vowing to not only wash the coat once he got back to the castle, but have Axel burn it to cinders and then scatter the ashes into the shadows, he grabbed both doors, pulled the handles and smirked at the sight standing before him.

"A-ha! Pay dirt!"

It was damaged, torn and ripped near the shoulders and sleeves, undoubtedly from whatever Ryuko had been doing in the realm of darkness, but there it was - his favorite coat.

And something else.

"No way!"

For a moment, Demyx forgot Saïx's orders about not drawing 'undue attention.' Find his coat and leave. Don't get spotted. Don't get caught. Don't do anything stupid enough to point Keyblade Masters towards the organization. And don't - *don't* - confront Ryuko Matoi unless he wished to be reduced to darkness. But who could blame him for laughing? Sure, they weren't genuine emotions. Just faded memories. But this was something nobody, least of all himself, expected.

"Talk about the score of a lifetime!"

Some of the Dancers, drawn by his uncharacteristically serious outburst and subsequently hitting his head against the roof of the truck, exchanged emotionless shrugs before returning to whatever they did when he wasn't ordering them around, "The shearing blades!?"

It seemed too good to be true.

This had to be a crazy dream.

But there they were, the infamous shearing blades.

Half-believing he'd been drawn into a trap, Demyx looked over his shoulder. Then under the truck. Then down the street. And then over his shoulder. But nobody was around. Nobody except Nobodies. This was real. This was happening. And after giving himself a metaphorical pat on the back, he reached into the truck, smashed the glass container and grabbed the legendary crimson blades.

Yet nothing happened.

"Man, talk about a major relief."

He expected more. Something more, what was the word, special. Maybe a little dangerous. Something like Life Fibers or whatever Vexen called them sucking his body dry and leaving him a drained corpse. But as he grabbed the shearing blades, nothing happened. No curse or side effect. No sudden loss of balance or inability to drop them. They were just a pair of oversized and incredibly sharp scissors. After listening to Xigbar and Vexen prattle on and on about how dangerous the shearing blades were, despite lacking a heart, Demyx couldn't help but feel a little disappointed.

But as the dancers, having finished their fun, poked and prodded the shearing blades, reality pounded itself into Demyx's thick skull, "What the hell am I saying?"

What the hell was he saying?

It wasn't so much a secret than something everybody knew. He didn't really pay attention to anything requiring too much - or really, any - work. But Vexen really wanted the shearing blades since, for whatever reason, he couldn't make them himself. And here he was, a professional slacker and underachiever, holding what Xemnas had declaring impossible to steal without suffering casualties bordering on a total wipeout of the organization, "I can't wait to see the look on Saïx's face when I show him these things!"

"Me too."

An unprofessional whine hovered in Demyx's throat as water colder than ice trickled down his spine.

As if hoping it was his imagination and not reality, he slowly craned his head upwards and promptly whined again. He hadn't heard her coming. He hadn't seen or *sensed* her coming until she spoke. But crouched atop the truck, eyes similar to Xion's glaring with a monstrous intensity exceeding her new appearance and remnants of healing magic clinging to every monster he'd taken down, Ryuko Matoi grinned with far too many teeth for his liking, ["Sup."](#)

Last edited: May 16, 2020

Chapter 19.1

"Me too."

A chill colder than Vexen's sense of humor froze the emptiness where Demyx's heart should've been.

It couldn't be, could it? No way. It wasn't possible. Not even *he* was unlucky enough to stumble across Ryuko Matoi without so much as a warning. His previously triumphant expression suspended halfway between disbelief and hope his imagination was playing tricks on his mind, the Melodious Nocturne slowly turned around and promptly found the shearing blades grow several times heavier.

Crouched atop one of the overturned trucks, eyes identical to Xion's narrowed and an appearance straight from his nightmares, Ryuko grinned with far too many teeth, "Sup."

"I... uh..."

"And FYI," hands folded upon knees angled slightly apart as the last dregs of restoration magic faded from the monsters lying unconscious throughout the street, Ryuko's smile grew increasingly cold, "They're the Rending Scissors, not shearing blades. Get it right, dipshit."

"Oh... uh... I'm sorry...?"

The confused apology spilled from Demyx's mouth like water. It should've been impossible for a Nobody such as himself to feel anything close to panic, fear or general anxiety without a heart. Or really, any emotion. But nobody told his shaking legs and quivering knees what was and was not impossible. Last he checked, Ryuko Matoi was supposed to be human. Or something close enough to human. He'd never really paid attention to Vexen's boring lectures on the woman other than 'avoid whatever world she was on' and the

standard 'convince Xiggy to talk to Saïx about rescheduling his missions.' After a certain point, it just became boring and repetitive hearing how Ryuko was some sort of demon. Why would he purposely subject himself to such blatant torture?

But now that he was standing in front of Ryuko - or maybe beneath made more sense - Demyx realized Vexen might have been right.

"I, uh, I mean," a hearty cough cleared his throat even as cold dread pooled inside his stomach. He could still get out of this. Folding his arms as best he could without stabbing himself with the Rending Scissors, Demyx tried putting on a brave face, "Between you and me, I always thought shearing blades sounded super lame."

"Keep talkin'," reddish-gold light flickered around Ryuko's fingers, heralding Threadcutter's manifestation into reality. She didn't know what it was. Maybe some of her memories got crossed. Or this was a bad case of *déjà vu*. But something about this guy felt familiar. And not in a good way, "It ain't gonna save you."

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 19 - Dancing With Myself

As his plan collapsed into the gutter, the Melodious Nocturne grimaced, "Uh, what *will* save me?"

It was a rhetorical question.

In a thousand years, he never expected Ryuko to bounce her dangerous-looking Keyblade on her shoulder, slouch forward and actually think about his suggestion. He might not have paid attention to Vexen whenever the guy started rambling about Ryuko Matoi. Other than Xion somehow being related to her. Or their hearts being identical, however and whatever that meant. That sort of complicated stuff flew over his head. Why concern himself with other people's problems when he could sit back, relax and underachieve twice as hard while working half as much? But there were a few things he'd

picked up. Random pieces of information he'd memorized mostly because someone, usually Saïx, threatened him.

For starters - if any member of the organization were unfortunate enough to encounter Ryuko, they were to immediately try to diffuse the situation.

Because she was a woman of focus and commitment.

Once Ryuko was pissed, unless you were strong enough to kill her, which he most definitely wasn't by any stretch of the imagination, she wouldn't stop until she killed *you*.

And that sucked.

"Alright," perched atop the truck like a gargoyle, ass resting against her calves, claws digging into metal and Keyblade sliding down the space between her shoulder and neck, sarcasm dripped from Ryuko's voice, "You want to talk? Fine. Let's with whoever Saïx is and why it sounds like you're their bitch."

Demyx balked at the absurd suggestion he *listened* to Saïx, "Can I get another question?"

"No."

A series of soft *cracks* scratched Demyx's ears when Ryuko twisted her head left and right before pointing a finger not at him, but the scissors he was holding against his chest, "Now hand those over," her voice deepened without lowering an octave, which the Nobody found even scarier than if she started shouting, "And start talking before I start wailing on your ass!"

"Well... I... uh... you see..."

His glanced towards the Dancers for backup, but none of them seemed eager to draw Ryuko's attention. In fact, they were slightly further back than he remembered. Not that Demyx could blame their

cowardice. *He* certainly didn't want to fight her. Not now. Not ever. But it wasn't like Ryuko was going to let him run back to the castle. And what he was experiencing ensured retreating in the opposite direction would be difficult, if not impossible. It wasn't light or darkness or nothingness. It was something else. Something different. Something he remembered feeling when Xion broke Lexaeus's arm. And with that supernatural weight pressing upon his shoulders like a boulder, after careful deliberation, he decided on a course of action.

"WATER!!!"

Yet nothing happened.

No magic.

No water.

Nothing.

Bewildered and flabbergasted, Demyx tried again... and again... and again... to drown Ryuko only for the magic to continue slipping between his fingers.

"Aww," from her vantage point atop the overturned truck, Threadcutter bouncing against her shoulder alongside her heartbeat, Ryuko grinned as the moron struggled to realize what she'd figured out years ago, "What's wrong? Don't tell me you're having performance issues?"

The out-of-the-blue insult cleared the cobwebs from the Nobody's mind.

"Hey! I'll have you know I *practiced* this move," Demyx argued with a tone that didn't quite sound convincing.

As a Nobody, certain skills came as naturally as breathing. And slacking. And underachieving. Sure, he wasn't the smartest person

in the castle. Or the quickest. Or strongest. Or most magical... whatever... person this side of Merlin. Or had a heart. Or multitask doing more than one thing at a time. But he was extremely dangerous and imposing... when he wanted to be. Which was, admittedly, almost never. But having defended both his honor and pride as a man, to the best of his ability while aware of who was looming over him like an imposing gargoyle, Demyx again tried summoning torrents of raging water, "It's just... ugh... why isn't this working!?"

Rumbles of thunder grew louder.

The air smelled of rain.

"Practice, huh?"

Ryuko's amusement was palpable, nearly bordering on sadistic, as she took advantage of the idiot trying - and failing miserably - to use magic while holding the Scissor Blades to take a closer look at the bizarre and strange creatures hovering out of range. Off the bat, without needing to spend time thinking, she knew they were Heartless. Or Unversed. Beanie-like hats, long pink braids almost reaching the ground, matching bell-bottom pants with a symbol she swore on Satsuki's honor looked familiar, weird boots, bladed hands and lips stitched into permanent grins.

And every one of them - including the moron - had the same awful stench as Nui Harime's Life Fiber puppet.

The not-so-subtle threat snapped Demyx back to reality, "I'm in serious trouble, aren't I?"

"Between you and me," shoving the bastard's original excuse in his face, Ryuko slowly stood up, Threadcutter sliding down her shoulder, "You probably should've practiced more."

[Her toes curled.](#)

Moisture hissed between slightly parted fangs.

And faster than the sniveling coward could retreat in the opposite direction, reality blurred into a pastiche of colors and sounds. With no more than an exhaled breath, Ryuko flickered out of existence. She moved through the darkness separating the world from the universe. She forced her way through the normally impenetrable barrier not through letting darkness into her heart but rather, sheer willpower and determination. It wasn't easy. In fact, it was *harder* than she remembered. But she wasn't someone to do things the easy way, especially since something about the bastard didn't sit right with her heart.

She didn't know what it was, but anyone even *remotely* associated with Nui Harime wasn't to be underestimated.

That was the reason why, as soon as reality collapsed upon itself, she juked hard left, narrowed eyes tracking the Scissor Blade as it sliced through existence inches from her face.

The bastard was fast.

Deceptively fast.

But not fast enough.

"Not bad..." forcing out the compliment, which sounded like an insult to pretty much anyone who didn't personally know her, Ryuko parried the Scissor Blade using the broad side of her Keyblade. And then promptly ducked beneath the other half of momentarily stolen hardened Life Fiber weapons, a single strand of hair floating in front of her eyes. Followed by planting a hand against the ground, flipping backwards, shifting Threadcutter into a reverse grip and deflecting both Scissor Blades at the same time. Sunlight glimmered off polished surfaces. The reflected brilliance almost made her wince. This was the first time in recent memory she fought someone wielding both halves of the Rending Scissors.

But the bastard wasn't anywhere near Nui Harime's level.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

He was an amateur who swung the Scissor Blades like they were normal swords.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

Dancing and weaving, Threadcutter deflecting anything she didn't avoid, Ryuko waited until the perfect moment before twisting her left shoulder, pivoting her hips, crossing one foot in front of the other, shifting her center of balance and thrusting Threadcutter between the overextended Scissor Blades.

Which the coward avoided by springing backwards.

"But it ain't good enough," her claws pressed against asphalt. The balls of her feet left the ground. Adrenaline flushed through her veins as she grasped Threadcutter with both hands and squeezed, transforming the Keyblade into an enormous crimson and gold greatsword.

WHUMP!!!

White-hot flames hot enough to burn Demyx's face - which was to say hotter than Axel's fire - exploded from Ryuko's Keyblade as she somersaulted into the air, arched her back and *swung*, **"NENSHŌ CLIMHAZZARD!!!"**

BOOM!!!

As the world spun and twisted, colors and noises mixing together before separating in a calamitous explosion that left his ears ringing, Demyx considered himself the luckiest Nobody in existence. Or non-existence considering he didn't have a heart and, ergo, didn't technically exist. He didn't know how it happened or whether he was luck or reflexes that saved his life. But falling sideways, courtesy of

stumbling over his own feet, onto the ground, he braced himself as fire and light quickly filled his vision, rippling down the street where he'd just been standing only a few seconds ago.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!"

Patting out the flames clinging to his coat, the Melodious Nocturne underwent an uncharacteristic epiphany sitting on the ground inches away from certain death - the desire to have listened to Vexen's boring lectures on Ryuko Matoi, "Ugh... oh, man... she's strong..."

It seemed obvious to anyone with half a brain. But experiencing Ryuko's strength up close and personal was totally different from listening to someone like Vexen or Xigbar drone on and on about the woman. Staring beyond his feet at the half-melted asphalt clinging to the edges of a large scar stretching more than fifty feet down the street, water exploding from several hydrants and more than one car alarm blaring in the distance, Demyx's stomach dropped as he realized Ryuko had avoided hitting any monsters. That sort of self-control was ridiculous. And bad. For him.

Because that meant Ryuko was completely focused on hitting him and nobody else, "Maybe coming here was a bad idea..."

"Tch," yanking Threadcutter out of the ground, Ryuko almost laughed at the bastard's dirty-blond mullet, "Looks like he got lucky."

She spotted them out of the corner of her eye.

Some of the strange creatures - make that most of the weird-as-shit monsters that weren't Heartless - had decided to join the fun.

Ryuko didn't think. She simply acted, flipping Threadcutter into a reverse grip, claws dragging along the Keyblade's teeth before ducking backwards underneath more than a handful of blade-like hands and feet glowing with an intense pink darkness not-so-different from the purple darkness Nui Harime had wielded with inhuman expertise at Twilight Town. Using one such unfortunate

creature as a springboard, she vaulted upwards, smashing it face-first into the ground hard enough to reduce it to darkness. And once airborne, floating gently upon dense currents of magic, Ryuko contorted her upper body clockwise and *swung* Threadcutter in a complete circle without meeting any resistance.

"Uhhh..."

Stricken speechless by the countless impossible things he'd experienced in the last thirty seconds, Demyx immediately dropped the Scissor Blades and raised his arms, "I surrender!"

Everything *stopped*.

Caught between disbelief and confusion, Ryuko watched the Scissor Blades still clattering to the ground, as if they would vanish, then at Demyx who'd dropped them like yesterday's garbage. A strange noise bubbled inside her throat. Her mouth twitched. She raised, then dropped, and raised Threadcutter, flames still clinging to its teeth. She blinked rapidly. She looked at the creatures who hadn't attacked, daring them to help make sense of the situation. Until finally, after quite a bit of time, she blurted out, "Give me a break! As if I'll believe that!"

"Wait! Wait! I'm serious!" Demyx fervently shuffled his hands back and forth.

Ryuko's eyebrow twitched again.

"Oh, is that right?" her Keyblade returned to its normal form in a flash of exceptionally annoyed light as she processed his obvious attempt at stalling for time.

"Come on! Your attack would've killed me if I hadn't tripped," Demyx panicked when Ryuko ground calloused knuckles against equally calloused skin, "Really! It's obvious I don't stand a chance of winning! No way can I win! So, if you promise to spare me, I'll spill the beans on Saïx.

"Nope."

Keeping a careful eye on the remaining creatures that weren't Heartless but were close enough that she could smell the darkness, all of which seemed not too eager to attack, Ryuko grinned. A smile not quite reaching her eyes, "That can wait. First things first - you're gonna tell me everything you know about Nui Harime. And don't *think* about transforming."

Demyx had expected talking about Saix - like what his powers were and why should she not fight him during the full moon. Or under the moon. Stuff he could lie about with a straight face. But nothing like *this*. Nui Harime? He didn't know who that was, why Ryuko wanted to know about them and, why she believed he could transform.

But he knew an opportunity when it fell into his lap.

"Oh, man, talk about embarrassing," as he shook his head, feigning bad memories about someone he'd never met, let alone knew, Demyx realized playing along might not have been the best idea. But how could he have known Ryuko and this... Nui Harime... weren't exactly friends? Yet keeping his cool when Ryuko's eyes snapped towards him with intensity enough to leave him speechless for the third or fourth time since dropping in on him, he coughed into his hand before continuing, "I guess... um... how should I say this..."

"With words!" Ryuko demanded angrily, "Say it with *words* before I shove Threadcutter up your freaking ass!"

"Right! Right! Right!"

Demyx didn't know if Ryuko was being serious about her threat, but he wasn't too eager to find out, "I can't say that I know Nui. More like, uh, she decided to mess with me," waiting a moment to find out if he'd guessed correctly, an unspoken sigh of relief trickled down his spine when Ryuko didn't suddenly claim Nui Harime was a guy, "Hey, don't look at me like that! I know it doesn't exactly sound super convincing! Or believable! If I were you and you were me, I wouldn't

believe me! I mean, why would Nui break into my room and steal one of my coats?"

Ryuko was silent.

And then she wasn't.

"You did all this for a coat?" lingering flames from Nenshō Climhazzard clung to the street, slightly melting asphalt while doing nothing more than leaving her skin slightly warm. The overwhelming scent of burning tar and rubber tickled Ryuko's nose as she let the question trickle into Demyx's head. Silhouetted against the dying inferno born from anger, irritation and determination, she chewed the inside of her cheek until blood filled her mouth, "Am I hearing you right?"

"It's an expensive coat!"

The Dancers who'd survived Ryuko's attack nodded from a safe distance.

And then *stopped* when the Keyblade Master silently stomped her foot against one of the Scissor Blades lying on the street.

"If you're gonna lie," catching the spinning Life Fiber sword before it hit the ground, Ryuko aimed it squarely between the weaselly bastard's eyes, "Put some fucking effort into it!"

Demyx didn't bother tossing another excuse against the wall.

BA-BUMP!!!

BANG!!!

BOOM!!!

But Ryuko wasn't born yesterday.

Experience and instinct granted knowledge. She'd fought people stronger, faster and smarter than him. She'd given - and received - punches, kicks and attacks more than capable of shattering concrete. Faster than Demyx's nervous fingers began strumming Arpeggio, dancing across darkness-coated strings and inducing a rhythm into both himself and the Dancers who'd survived her initial counter offensive, she threw herself backwards, knees bent until her ass nearly touched the street, arms spread wide to maintain her balance, Threadcutter and Scissor Blade shaking in her fingers, vermilion and navy blue woven together so thoroughly it was impossible to separate the colors rippling in the cacophonous eruptions and eyes glaring through the mixture of darkness and water.

"Shit!"

It was a thousand times worse than standing inside a vacuum during a rainstorm while listening to godawful music played by a moogler with absolutely zero talent. She'd rather listen to Steiner's speeches about honor, chivalry and discipline. Caught between a rock and a hard place, unable to move unless she wanted to discover how much magical bubbles packing enough of a punch to overturn multi-ton trucks, cars and anything standing in their way hurt, Ryuko's eyebrow twitched, "This guy is really starting to piss me the hell off!"

She couldn't see anything.

But she heard *everything*.

Which was why, without any doubt, Ryuko knew how *bad* the asshole's music was. She wasn't too good herself. She didn't have a lot of time to practice between rescuing people and worlds from darkness. But this son of a bitch sounded purposely terrible. Every note was off-key. There was no rhythm or tempo. It felt like someone was scratching their nails against a chalkboard inside her head. She wanted - no, she needed - to grab his sitar and smash it against her knee before doing the same thing to his face.

"Come on!"

Yet finding an opening wasn't easy by any stretch of her imagination.

There weren't any gaps between the bubbles big enough to squeeze through. But she had to move. Quickly. As in, right the goddamn now! Because she could feel it in her heart. The bastard didn't give two shits about collateral damage. She grunted. Blunted claws squeezed Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade as human-looking eyes swiveled towards the monsters lying throughout the street. Her cheeks twitched. Her ears rang. Something in her head broke. Either her patience or desire to fuck around Ryuko didn't know. Or care about. She was long past that point.

Between fangs capable of ripping and tearing metal, Ryuko *screamed* a single word.

An unyielding and powerful declaration that originated deep within her heart.

"ENOUGH!!!"

To Ryuko, shouting changed absolutely nothing. She was merely releasing pent-up tension, clearing her mind and heart of unnecessary distractions so she could think of a way to turn the tables on the musical bastard while saving the monsters. It was something she'd done dozens of times, usually with nothing unexpected happening other than someone or another complaining about her screaming at the top of her lungs.

But this time was different.

"What the hell?" Demyx stopped playing - or rather, he was forced to stop playing - when overwhelming crimson light spilled from Ryuko Matoi's heart, "N-No way!!!"

And then *it* slammed into his non-existent existence like a stampede of wild red chocobos - a darkness so immense he couldn't believe

Ryuko hadn't turned into a Heartless.

Ryuko didn't know why the bastard's music nonsense stopped, or why he froze with his jaw hitting the ground, but she wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth. Taking a staggered breath, she somersaulted onto her feet, landing in a kneeling crouch with Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade crossed behind her back. She grimaced, lips twitching as the light which surprised Demyx faded into the background, leaving her silhouetted against the afternoon sun.

CLACK!!!

Her claws *clacked* against asphalt as she launched herself towards the bastard looking like a deer caught in the headlights, "You're not the first to weaponize music!"

Water quavers and clones manifested when the mullet-wearing nobody's terrible music resumed.

But in a burst of speed impossible to describe as anything besides fast, she twisted midair, flipped the Scissor Blade and Threadcutter into reverse grips, pushed off her right foot and sliced through the phantasmal imposters, "BUT COMPARED TO HER..."

It was quick.

It was brutal.

It was comprehensive.

By the time Demyx realized Ryuko shattered Arpeggio with a well-timed strike of her Scissor Blade, he was pinned to the ground - one foot planted on his right wrist, another against his left hand and a Keyblade aimed at his face, "... YOU FREAKING SUCK!!!"

Last edited: May 24, 2020

Chapter 19.2

As I said, the Organization XIII in my story have their manga personalities. Which is interesting if you compare them to characters from Kill la Kill. They aren't perfect, but Xemnas is Ragyo (the big bad), Saix is Satsuki (planning to sacrifice everyone to take down Xemnas), Demyx is Mako (lazy slacker), Zexion/Vexen are both Inumuta, Xaldin is Sanageyama (strong but gets no respect), Larxene is Jakuzure (short-tempered and vulgar) Xigbar is Hououmaru (the hyper-competent assistant), Axel is Ryuko (hot-blooded and determined to find out what happened to his friend yet slowly warms up and makes friends along the way).

[img: <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/Dw16DezXgAAs1rF?format=jpg&name=900x900>]

Saix's eyebrow stood upon the precipice of twitching.

He'd expected genuine cooperation and received nothing but scornful derision. And there was no one to blame but himself for raising his hopes. The Grey Area had been constructed as the organization's meeting room, lounge and where members were assigned missions. Wedge-shaped, one wall replaced with full-length windows, tables, couches, a small kitchen with accompanying fridge and multiple artisanal paintings depicting landscapes, buildings and other pastel environments. It was, as Axel described years ago, a place designed to help substitute the emptiness of their existences through forced companionship and camaraderie.

Ridiculous.

Without memories to fall back upon, Nobodies could not experience genuine emotions or friendship. They did not exist and, therefore, could not create anything new. He remembered anger. Happiness. Sadness. Embarrassment. Yet it was like watching someone else's life. They were nothing more than echoes. Memories eroded by

emptiness and time until nothing remained but grains of sand falling between their fingers. He knew this. Axel knew this. In time, Roxas would come to understand the underlying logic governing their non-existence.

But standing in the entrance of said meeting room, clipboard in hand and amber eyes sweeping left to right, counting the four members who'd answered his summons, the Luna Diviner felt something resembling annoyance in the spot where his heart once stood.

"Where is Demyx?"

It wasn't so much a question as a statement. Either Demyx was in the castle. Or he was not. There was no other answer, "He should've returned by now."

"Dunno," feet crossed over an armrest, pillow propped underneath his neck, a glass of something hard on the table next to the couch he'd commandeered and completely unmotivated to move without someone physically making him, Xigbar flipped to the next page in 'Weapons Monthly, October Issue,' never quite answering Saïx's so-called question, "Huh, there's a sale on Pulse Ammo."

He didn't *need* ammunition.

But options couldn't hurt.

If the worst came to pass, thanks to the old coot vanishing into the void with his Keyblade, he needed some real ammo.

Something with more oomph.

Something that could knock Ryuko flat on her ass.

"What am I, his babysitter?" Larxene, sitting on another couch, removed a hand from the manga she'd borrowed from Xaldin to give Saïx a rather rude gesture.

"It would seem not only has the dealer been replaced," slouched at a table, cheek resting on his hand, Luxord drew the ace of spades and placed the card he'd sought for quite some time in the upper right corner, "We're playing an entirely different game by house rules. How truly disconcerting."

"Hmm..."

Several meters away from the gambler, Lexaeus scratched his chiseled features, immersed in the five-thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle he'd spent the last few days carefully assembling piece by piece, "Perhaps some ill fate has befallen our unlucky comrade."

"Oh, I know! Maybe *she* got him," Larxene callously snarked, remembering that *thing* Vexen's stupid little puppet encountered, "Which is too bad. Not that I'd be there, but I would've loved to watch Demyx piss himself."

"Yup," heavily interested in an article about weight balancing between steel and mithril on two-handed weapons, Xigbar ignored Larxene's vulgarity with the skill of a veteran. She spoke a big game. But compared to Ryuko - and this was probably the only time he'd compliment the terrifying keyslinger - Larxene was an amateur. When she wove curses into a tapestry impressive enough to choke a Dusk, *maybe* he'd listen. But until then? Turning to the next page, sneezing then yawning, Xigbar shrugged, "Ryuko's probably killed him. Bummer. The guy still owed me twenty Gil."

"Oh, I'm not talking about *Ryuko*."

Larxene didn't know what she found funnier - how everyone suddenly grew silent or Xigbar slowly lowering his stupid magazine.

"Aw, don't tell me Vexen kept everything hush-hush," a malicious smile twisted the corners of her mouth. She *loved* hurting people. Physically or emotionally didn't matter as long as their hearts shattered into millions of pieces. Thrice the pain was thrice the pleasure. But then that saccharine bitch came along and ruined

everything. Sure, watching Vexen shit his pants had been fun. But she didn't *like* someone, even a monster who wore so much pink she got a cavity by association, one-upping her, "I'm sure he told *you* everything, Xiggy."

Stretching her arms over the couch, her smile widened at the sharpshooter's displeased reaction.

"Oh? He *didn't*?" electricity crackled between Larxene's fingers, filling her head with the smell of burning ozone, "Well, if you're *that* curious, perhaps you should talk to him. I'm sure he'll tell you where to find her. Or maybe, she'll find *you*."

Xigbar's eye twitched.

"Nui Harime."

Zexion walked into the Grey Area, bypassing Saïx without affording his fellow Nobody so much as an excuse me or hello, "Her name is Nui Harime."

"The hell kind of name is that?"

Irritated, annoyed and frustrated at someone running her hard-earned fun, Larxene sat up, slammed her hand against the couch and then pointed not at Zexion, but Xigbar, "It sounds like something *he* would come up with."

"Hey, give me some credit," staring at a five-pronged shuriken filling most of a page, Xigbar shrugged, "I came up with your name, right?"

"What's that supposed to mean!?" Larxene half-threatened, half-questioned the sharpshooter.

"Ryuko Matoi. Satsuki Kiryuin. Mako Mankanshoku. Ira Gamagori," it was not Xigbar who spelled out the obvious to the Savage Nymph. Still focusing on the unfinished puzzle strewn across the table, barely a quarter finished and half the pieces still in the box, Lexaeus

scratched his chin, "And now Nui Harime. She heralds from the same world, doesn't she, Zexion?"

"Indeed."

'Determined' wasn't exactly the word percolating through Zexion's mind as he folded his arms and leaned backwards until his shoulders rested upon solid glass. 'Concerned' perhaps made more sense. Or apprehensive. Information was his specialty. Knowledge was power. Yet what he'd learned reviewing footage in the Chamber of Ruminations had rendered him uncharacteristically subdued for someone who prided themselves in explaining every detail to those willing - or not - to listen, "Amu Ito. Appeared on Twilight Town a little over ten years ago. Former apprentice to Elmina. Received her Grandmaster Synthesis Certification in less than twenty months. But that was merely an alias she'd woven to cover her tracks."

A bang of steel-blue silver brushed against the secretive schemer's eyes.

"Her true name was Nui Harime," stroking his chin, he restrained himself from summoning forth an illusion of the woman. Not because he could not. He needed but a sample of one's memories, collected via personal interaction or observation, to manifest illusions possessing their personalities, powers and abilities. And he had that in abundance thanks to Vexen's disturbing video. But her monstrous existence made any such attempt exceptionally dangerous. A risk he refused to take a second time, "And she is just like Ryuko Matoi."

Xigbar lowered his magazine.

"As if this game of chance wasn't already thrilling enough," tapping a card against the table without allowing observing the number or suite, Luxord chewed the inside of his cheek.

Fate was an unpredictable and capricious mistress. It was the manifestation of chaos, born of destiny's mercurial temperament and disdain towards the hearts of mortal men such as himself. For no

reason other than vindictive amusement, fate could capsize one's vessel. Or leave one at the unrelenting mercy of ever-changing winds. He, himself, as a lowly member and lacky of the Organization, knew nothing of Xemnas's machinations. Perhaps the man was honest in his goal of obtaining Kingdom Hearts to restore their missing hearts. A laudable goal, if true, of course. He cared greatly about remembering who he had once been and why he'd remembered nothing except a name that bore no meaning. But such things remained squarely upon fate's cruel shoulders.

Yet there existed those who seized control of their own fates.

Such as Ryuko.

Whose destiny stood unwritten until she, herself, with her own hands, wrote it down.

"However, curiosity whispers to me," smirking more out of habit than genuine amusement, Luxord flipped over the card, staring at the tyrannical queen of hearts, "Association does not beget alliance. Is this Nui Harime an enemy? Or ally? Will she or won't she offer her services against Ryuko if promised substantial reward?"

Zexion closed his eyes.

"Nui Harime is an insane and highly malevolent individual," a short breath passed between the schemer's lips - another uncharacteristic quirk he'd thought impossible until but a few days ago, "She's more likely to kill everything in her path than listen to anything we might say."

"Ugh, that *suuuucks*."

To say Larxene was annoyed was like saying Saïx didn't have a sense of humor. Or Roxas was an idiot. Or Xemnas was an enigmatic asshole. Or Xion was stupid nice. It was obvious to everyone with half a brain, "Hey, here's an idea. There are thirteen of us and one of her. Why don't we - oh, I don't know - *kill* her?"

"Ryuko's physiology allows her to survive normally fatal wounds. She can survive losing most of her head, limbs and internal organs. And then recover. Not to mention her resistance to magic. Something Maleficent discovered the hard way," as he listed information every member of the Organization should've already known, Zexion watched Larxene's expression shift from annoyance to irritation before settling on begrudging frustration, "Suffice to say, Nui Harime won't be any easier to deal with."

"Not to mention she has it out for poor Vexen."

She didn't *mean* to divulge classified information, but after listening to Zexion talk her ears off, Larxene no longer cared, "Oops! Was that supposed to be a secret? My bad."

"... terrific.

Acting the part of a care-free, lazy idiot more concerned with doing nothing but whatever fancies passed through his mind wasn't as easy as everyone thought. Some days, he wanted nothing more than to be himself. The old him. He'd donned more guises than he cared to recall. At one point, he'd had a pair of students. But that hadn't exactly ended well. One fell into darkness. And the other lost everything until nothing remained but an empty shell. Needless to say, after losing his heart, his original appearance and spending countless centuries waiting in the shadows until someone like the old coot came along, all so he could see his friends once more, knowing another monster like Ryuko existed almost made Xigbar laugh.

"Just putting this out there - if Xemnas starts plannin' some kind of crazy shindig to knock off Ryuko's long-lost sister, you can just count me out," finishing his drink in one gulp, Xigbar laid back down on the couch and yawned, "I've got too much to live for."

Larxene rolled her eyes, "Says the guy who spends half the day *sleeping*."

"I do my best scheming while asleep," placing the half-open magazine over his face, Xigbar yawned, drowning out Larxene's glare through sheer force of will.

The ten of hearts followed the four of clubs while immediately preceding the ace of diamonds and two of hearts. A swipe of his hand spread all fifty-two cards across the table. Luxord looked at the cards, sharp blue eyes focusing not on the patterns, but the conversation quickly reaching its undeniable conclusion. Privy to some details concerning Ryuko Matoi and her intriguing friends wasn't, courtesy of his lowly station, yet he was no fool. Fate might be undeniable. But only a fool allowed cards dictate their fate. When faced with the prospects of fighting one of two monsters on a purely philosophical basis, nothing on the line except their pride and embarrassment, a man of average intelligence would undoubtedly pick one without putting any thought into the decision.

An intelligent man would weigh the pros and cons before making their choice.

But a gambler would realize there weren't two options, but three - fight one monster... fight the other... or fight neither.

"An enemy that knows of us... yet makes no move against us... is quite dangerous," cards flowed between his fingers like water. Without looking at the table, Luxord introduced infinite chaos to the deck of fifty-two split into four kingdoms. Over and over again he shuffled them. And upon finishing his own deliberations on the subject he knew little about, he decided to reset the game, "What is her objective? She must desire more than our comrade's death?"

Xigbar didn't want to think about the question.

Mostly because he'd already thought about it more times than he cared to remember.

"You're asking the wrong person."

One big secret about the Organization? He was Xemnas's right-hand-man. Not Saïx or Zexion or anyone. Sure, he deferred to their authority whenever they stomped their foot against the ground. But he was the guy behind the guy. He, not anyone else, patched the holes in the geezer's master plan after the bastard got his ass kicked six ways to Sunday by that blue haired keyslinger. And thanks to being looped into everything, he knew more about Life Fibers than almost anyone. Except maybe Vexen. Which was probably why Ryuko's sociopathic sister-in-law wanted Vexen dead because if countless centuries doing nothing but watching and waiting had taught him anything, it was that some things were better off left alone.

Such as a full-scale, nearly perfect Life Fiber Replica of Ryuko with some of Sora's memories thrown in for good measure.

No wonder Nui was pissed.

"But Vexen ain't exactly in a talkative mood these days," unable to get some much-needed sleep, Xigbar found himself drawn back into the conversation, "If you catch my drift."

Standing at the entrance to the room, ignored and forgotten by his comrades, listening to the conversation shift further from his original question, Saïx said nothing.

Because there wasn't anything *to* say.

It should've been relatively simple even for someone of Demyx's meager abilities - recover Ryuko Matoi's coat so Vexen could extract data on her movements in the realm of darkness following Replica Number Thirteen going permanently offline and leave. No fighting. No sightseeing. No souvenirs. In the chaos following Sora, Mickey and Ryuko sealing the door to darkness and restoring most of the worlds, the possibility of running into the Keyblade Master should've been slim to none. And if Ryuko was there, Demyx should have immediately retreated back to the castle.

Yet Demyx had somehow found a way to screw even that up.

But another being like Ryuko? Saïx took advantage of the diverging conversation - which was now about whether or not Satsuki Kiryuin was like Ryuko Matoi - to address the rather delicate matter. Nui Harime. A name fitting for one who'd lacked a heart. They had known someone was stalking Sora for weeks. Wonderland. Thebes. Agrabah. Halloween Town. An enigmatic woman in a pink coat similar to the Organization's popping in and out of reality. What did the monster see in an otherwise ordinary boy who miraculously stumbled across a Keyblade that he, nor anyone else, did not?

Sora was nothing special.

If not for his friends and luck, the boy would never have survived as long as he did.

Larxene's vulgarity towards something Lexaeus, of all people, said caught the Luna Diviner's attention. But pushing her insolence aside for the moment, the Luna Diviner realized he needed to speak with Vexen. Not only about bolstering the Chamber of Ruminations security, but their puppet.

It was time Xion proved its worth to the Organization.

But first things first...

["Where's Axel?"](#)

Saïx swept the room, searching and failing to find his friend. How strange. He hadn't assigned Axel any missions or authorized leave time for the day. Or had he? A quick reexamination of the clipboard proved otherwise. Marluxia and Vexen were at Castle Oblivion. Xaldin on assignment. Xion inside its chambers. Everyone else was accounted and present. Everyone except Xemnas and two other people, "... and where is Roxas?"

"Twilight Town, I believe," Luxord scratched his goatee, eyes staring at the five of hearts laying face-up on the table, "You told them to expect nothing important today and it appears they've taken your sound advice to heart."

The Luna Diviner resisted the urge to hit something.

"I see... then there is nothing preventing you from checking on Demyx," was it pointlessly cruel burdening Luxord with such responsibly? Perhaps. But without a heart, Saïx felt nothing as he marked a box on the clipboard, "You leave in five minutes."

"... very well," the Gambler of Fate's momentary hesitation suggested a level of discontent at odds with his resigned acceptance, "I shall assist him if able."

"But if he's betrayed the Organization - " Saïx's cross-shaped scar deepened despite his voice and expression remaining perfectly stoic. Even as one of the lowest ranked members of the Organization, barely above the Dusks sweeping the floors and folding their clothes, Demyx was beholden to information that could cripple their operations if it fell into the wrong hands, " - do not hesitate to eliminate him. Is that clear?"

Last edited: May 31, 2020

Chapter 19.3

"... YOU FREAKING SUCK!!!"

As the fight climaxed in a cacophonous burst of magic, anger and fire, the adrenaline pumping through Ryuko's veins faded into a cold trickle down the contours of her back.

Her shoulders rose and fell in rhythm with her labored breathing. She licked her lips, unused to the fangs filling her mouth. Her throat was parched. Threadcutter burned with righteous indignation. A powerful light born of unyielding determination only matched by Satsuki's illuminated disheveled hair dripping with water. Claws blunt enough to hold someone's wrist without stabbing through flesh and bone yet sharp enough to tear into metal trembled. She grimaced. She snarled. She wanted to say a lot of things that weren't helpful. But looming over the bastard who thought launching a sneak against was brilliant, she flipped Threadcutter into a reverse hold and forcibly articulated the sum total of her passion and indignation.

"Start talking - "

So far beyond angry that she'd circled back around to tranquil fury, Ryuko crossed the Scissor Blade over Threadcutter, planted them on either side of the cloaked asshole's neck like make-shift scissors and closed them, stopping only upon touching something soft and vulnerable. It was an empty threat. Pointless posturing. She had no intention of lopping off his head. But *he* didn't know that, " - unless you want to learn to live without..."

It took five seconds for Ryuko's mind to catch up to reality.

Her thoughts closed ranks. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, a strangled gasped forcing its way out of her throat.

"You gotta be..."

She was a Keyblade Master. Monsters. Dragons. Peppy sociopaths. A woman wearing a chocobo costume. She'd seen shit people would think impossible. But despite fighting almost to death against some of the most dangerous beings to have walked the universe - Ragyo, Maleficent, Nui, Ardyn, Xehanort and the physical manifestation of darkness itself - Ryuko found herself at a loss for words when the sniveling bastard's eyes rolled into the back of his skull.

"... did he just..."

Threadcutter and the Scissor Blade trembled as her knuckles blanched a lighter shade of green.

The son of a bitch *fainted*.

Not even Pete fainted!

"Oh, come on!"

Swinging her arms back and forth, too pissed to care about nearly throwing Threadcutter through a truck, Ryuko didn't know what to think. If this freak was one of Nui Harime's stupid doppelgängers, it was good. Real good. Almost perfect. But something about him raised alarm bells in her heart. Nui Harime was crazy bullshit personified. The bitch schemed in ways Satsuki called Machiavellian or another fancy word her sister pulled out of the dictionary. But she didn't know how to be human. She could pretend all she wanted, but 'humanity' and 'Nui' went together like oil and water. And this guy was way too normal even for a backstabbing freak for that bitch to be puppeteering his strings from the shadows. She had to be missing something.

But what?

Maybe this guy was under Nui's control? That made sense. But that didn't explain the strange creatures. How did *they* fit into the equation? And if this guy was some random asshole kidnapped off the street, why did he smell like wet dog mixed with dead skunk?

There was only one way to find out.

A sharp whistle screamed against the afternoon as she spun the Scissor Blade several times around her hand before stabbing it into the ground next to her thigh. No longer encumbered by her weapon's side-effect, Ryuko swept Threadcutter overhead in a single smooth motion. She pinched the corner of her mouth between razor-sharp incisors as bluish-green magic reminiscent of a tropical ocean and smelling faintly of a babbling brook deep inside a lush forest encircled her Keyblade. She twisted her wrist ninety degrees clockwise. Threadcutter's keychain jingled as moisture condensed from nothingness into existence.

"WATERA!"

There was a good chunk of people who thought she was limited to fire magic.

It had been true. Once upon a time. Ten years ago. When she'd gone looking for Satsuki and Mako and everyone with little more than a month's training under her belt, guilt staining her heart with darkness and the barest concept of what Threadcutter represented. Everyone had a specialty. One school of magic they were good at. Usually. Terra's was earth. Ven's was wind. Aqua's was water and ice. Beatrix's was gravity. And Lulu's was pretty much all magic. Her specialty was fire. But ten years was a *really* long time. A lot of time. Enough time to get her head on straight, talk with Satsuki, remember Elsa's problems, think about where she wanted to go in life and take a few lessons from kicking Maleficent's pale ass to heart.

Keyblades were natural magical conduits.

But you still needed to practice.

Threadcutter could only do so much when you had zero magical aptitude in earth, water, ice and lightning and couldn't slow down time to save your life.

Which is why she had practiced.

And practiced.

And practiced until her fingers bled.

And then practiced some more.

Several gallons of ice-cold water crushed the asshole, dragging him back to the consciousness as a sputtering mess of snot and tears.

"Hey, sleeping beauty," a seemingly friendly smile caressed Ryuko's face, "Enjoy your nap?"

In his half-conscious state, lingering between sleeping and waking, memories of the last few minutes nothing more than fuzzy images and sounds that didn't quite make sense, Demyx barely comprehended Ryuko's mocking concern for his health and safety. Coughing out mouthfuls of stale water, he blinked several times in rapid succession. He tried remembering what happened, but his head felt like he'd gone toe-to-toe with Saix during the full moon. But the longer he stared at the monstrous woman kneeling over him with an exceptionally dangerous-looking Keyblade on her shoulder, the faster Demyx remembered. And as that nightmarish realization dawned upon the emptiness where his heart would have been, she moved.

And he suddenly found that very same Keyblade aimed squarely between his eyes.

"I hope so, because there's something that's been bugging the hell out of me," the underlying disgust oozed from Ryuko's heart as she leaned on the Scissor Blade stabbed dangerous close to the bastard's crotch, claws methodically strumming against hardened metal, "You don't mind answering a very simple question, do you?"

Demyx nodded.

Ryuko's fingers shifted along the Scissor Blade.

Demyx shook his head *harder*.

"That shit you said about Nui Harime," exchanging the Scissor Blade for the front of the bastard's stupid coat, handfuls of black fabric bunching between her claws, Ryuko emphasized her question with profound *annoyance* Satsuki would find impressive, "You were lying, weren't you?"

Demyx stammered.

He had pride as a Nobody, as little as it may be.

But the possibility of fading into darkness or worse was making him seriously reconsider keeping his mouth shut, "Uh... y-yes?"

As the honest truth spilled forth, Demyx closed his eyes and awaited the inevitable beatdown.

Several seconds passed.

Ryuko's grip on his coat tightened.

Several more seconds passed.

Yet nothing happened.

Slowly, hesitantly, half-convinced Ryuko was waiting until he lowered his guard, Demyx opened an eye. And then the other. He blinked. His wince softened into confusion as Ryuko's Keyblade drifted away from his forehead, past his nose and chin before falling sideways to the ground. Mouth hanging partially open, matching the stupidity etched upon his drenched face, the Melodious Nocturne found himself with a front-row seat to the master's unraveling train of thought. Fury and irritation. Bewilderment. Embarrassment. Countless emotions swirled inside Ryuko's heart. He could tell that much. But not much more.

Because at some point between embarrassment and indignation, she'd let go of his coat.

And still terrified at what she might do, Demyx didn't fully *why* the world was shifting until his head hit the ground.

"... damn it..."

Ryuko swore with emphasis normally reserved for those who jumped head-first into darkness. The few who thought threatening her friends was a good idea. Satsuki could take care of herself. But Mako? Anyone who *considered* laying a finger on Mako would find themselves ripped apart limb by limb. And that was after Gamagori finished with them. She'd make Maleficent's humiliation look like a walk in the park. But this? She bit her lip, nearly drawing blood. Despite cursing a proverbial storm, including a few words she'd promised to never repeat in pleasant company, she couldn't muster the energy to bash the bastard over the head with Threadcutter, adding further injury to insult.

She was still pissed beyond measuring.

But not at the sociopath acting like she'd given him a concussion.

But at herself.

It was obvious. Stupidly obvious. How could she have been so goddamn stupid? The only reason this freak knew about Nui Harime was because she told him about her. She gave him the perfect cover story. One she believed hook, line and sinker. Maybe it hadn't worked out the way he wanted. *Obviously* getting his ass kicked wasn't part of his masterful plan. And no matter what he knew about Nui Harime, after he and his minions attacked innocent monsters, she wasn't about to let him waltz back into the darkness. Still, falling for something so obvious was freaking embarrassing! If her skin wasn't putrid green, she'd probably be sputtering while sporting a blush more fitting for a high schooler asking out their secret crush

than someone who'd been through bullshit since they were seventeen.

Ryuko's eyebrow twitched.

That's it.

She was *done*.

After hunting Gilgamesh... trekking through the Realm of Darkness... fighting the Cloud of Darkness and countless Heartless... dealing with one of Nui's familiar presents... helping close the door to darkness... and whatever *this* was, she'd finally reached her limits. She was one hundred percent *finished*. There was only so much anybody could take before enough was enough. Letting out a sigh heavy with frustration, annoyance and negativity collected over months wandering the darkness, Ryuko closed her eyes, breathed in the humid Monstropolis afternoon and gave into gravity's inevitable embrace.

She needed a vacation.

Costa del Sol was nice this time of year.

But reservations were a bitch.

Luckily, she was rich.

And famous.

"Hey."

She didn't know why she talked. Maybe she'd snapped after spending so much time in the darkness. Or something about the freak made her feel sorry for him. Whatever the reason was, Ryuko lurched off the ground, disheveled hair falling in front of her face, Threadcutter propped between her legs and the Scissor Blade within arm's range on the off chance she needed to teach the bastard another lesson, "You got a name?"

What followed could be broken into parts - Demyx's reaction to her question and Ryuko's reaction to his reaction.

"Err... huh?" Demyx stopped rubbing his head, "My name?"

"Yeah, your name," an exasperated glower forced itself onto Ryuko's monstrous visage, "Since you know my name, it's only fair you tell me yours, right?"

She left the implications of refusing her request - or giving a fake name - to Demyx's running imagination.

"Yeah..." an uncharacteristic seriousness replaced the Melodious Nocturne's worried and unnerved expression.

Never let it be said that Demyx didn't have survival instincts. He might be lazy. And a slacker proud of accomplishing the minimal work possible in the most amount of time. But when push came to shove, he was the first to suggest advancing in the opposite direction after taking his own helpful advice. It was common sense. The less you fight, the lower the chances of stumbling across someone *significantly* above your weight class. Like Ryuko Matoi, who put Larxene and Saix combined to shame. Sitting up despite his throbbing head and feeling he was missing something, he crossed his arms, frowned, unfolded his arms and rubbed his neck.

Giving away his name was technically, in a sense, betraying the Organization.

And Xemnas had ordered them to keep low profiles until it was time to reveal themselves.

But if he didn't give Ryuko *something*, she'd pound his face inside-out.

Or worse.

The choice wasn't hard.

"Just call me Demyx! That's D-E-M-Y-X. And... um... I'd like to point out... err, for the record... I might have overreacted," his eyes drifted towards the scissor sword located conveniently close to Ryuko's unoccupied hand. Fingers that, he realized, drifted closer and closer to said weapon the longer he talked, "It's just that you're *really* scary and -"

"Shut up," as Demyx kept talking and talking and talking, Ryuko pinched the bridge of her nose, "Oh, fuck it. I'm too tired to deal with you."

She hoped Aqua and Gilgamesh escaped the realm of darkness.

Because at the rate things were going, she was going to murder Demyx before he gave her any useful information.

Last edited: Jun 8, 2020

Re:Mind [Volière]

She could not remember anything before opening her eyes.

Her entire world was four walls of purest white inside a castle of trapped time.

When they'd walked out of the darkness, she hadn't reacted.

Three initially appeared, followed by another five, making eight.

They called themselves Nobodies. They said she was a Nobody. A special Nobody.

*They were curious about her... about her powers... about her connection to **him**.*

One of them had spoken at great lengths about the uniqueness of her existence and powers.

He'd given her a name, a name he deemed special above all else.

It hadn't felt right.

*It hadn't been **her** name.*

And so, for the first time since awakening, she'd spoken for herself. A single word passing through her parted lips.

A name.

Her name and yet not her name.

The man had been amused by her defiance.

She was a prisoner, his puppet in all but name.

No matter how strong she was, he was stronger.

Her powers did not work on him. They did not work on his organization or the creatures watching from the shadows.

She was a bird in a cage, trapped not by bars but walls.

Her existence lacked meaning and purpose.

She was alone.

That was why, now, for the second time since awakening, she'd acted for herself.

In the middle of her room, silence pressing against her ears, she picked up a crayon - rustic red, worn down and wax paper partially peeled.

Her gaze softened.

Her hand moving.

Tracing a line of red upon the paper, she reached out to his Heart, walking the links connecting one memory to the next.

Eventually, soon, he would arrive at the castle.

And her loneliness would finally end.

She was a witch who could manipulate memories.

And through those memories, hearts and emotions as well.

*But only memories connected to **him**.*

The stronger the connection, the stronger her powers.

She could see them. All of them. Some clearer than the others. Hearts connected to other Hearts.

Yet as she drew, tracing patterns and objects, following one memory to another, something caught her attention.

A Heart different from the others.

She stopped drawing, the crayon coming to a rest against the sketchpad.

The silence of her room weakened.

*She could see the links, memories stretching more than a decade, connecting **his** heart to this one.*

But nothing else.

A strange sensation burgeoned in her chest.

She put the red crayon away, replacing it with another color - navy blue, halfway used and worn on one side.

Wiping away wax shaving, her hand began moving.

White changed to dark blue, streaks of wax tracing over each other upon crinkled paper.

Discarded shavings fluttered to the floor around her feet, tickling her toes.

But she didn't stop drawing.

Her powers... the power over memories... blossomed under nascent curiosity.

*She followed the links connecting memories deeper and deeper, moving further and further from **his** Heart.*

They went on for eternity.

And then, as if it had always been there, darkness swallowed her.

So much darkness she couldn't breathe.

Followed by light.

A light so powerful and bright she couldn't open her eyes.

Yet something compelled her.

Her eyelids fluttered open, and suddenly, she saw everything.

Memories.

The chains connecting memories.

Light hued sinister reddish orange.

Darkness burning a malevolent purplish blue.

*And **her**.*

A broken family. A lonely childhood. A city on a lake. A school on a mountain.

Revenge. Hatred. Anger. Despair. Self-loathing. Loneliness.

A friend.

A smile warmer than the sun itself.

Acceptance.

Happiness.

A companion born from her own Heart.

The hopes and dreams of an entire world rested upon their shoulders.

Two Hearts in one body.

Twin existence fighting as one.

*Floating in the glowing darkness, something inside her chest
painfully clenched.*

A strange liquid formed at the corners of her eyes.

*Without thinking, she reached towards the soothing light, ethereal
fingers pushing through liquid darkness.*

Memories stretched into the past.

Many pasts.

And many futures.

A tapestry of memories with no beginning or end.

*Something beyond space and time stirred in response to her
curiosity.*

*An incomprehensible existence defying light and darkness emerged
from the shadows.*

Another heart.

Another set of memories.

Hatred. Anger. Revenge. Mockery. Amusement. Annoyance. Disgust.

Cold fingers caressed the back of her neck.

Fingers cold as death itself.

A light darker than shadows.

A presence rapidly swallowing her existence.

Another light, warm and soothing, possessing an incredible power, shattered the fingers clasped around her neck.

The dark presence receded into the shadows.

And the light, a shimmering orb of crimson orange, looked in her direction, eyes that were not eyes blinking with strange humanity.

The black crayon fell from her numb fingers, breaking into several pieces on the floor.

She awoke with a sharp gasp.

Breathing heavily, she tried remembering what happened, yet the memories were already fading.

She glanced at her sketchpad.

Her fingers glided over something she couldn't remember drawing.

Colored nearly to perfection was a young woman.

Blue eyes. Navy blue hair with a single red streak. A frown. A strange red blade.

And a school uniform with a single multicolored eye.

Last edited: Jun 12, 2020

Chapter 19.4

Before I get started, I would like to thank [MetropolisMCU](#) for creating a tvtropes page for this story. If you have the time, go over and read it, add to it, etc. Anyway, some information has come out about Kingdom Hearts: Dark Road - some new Keyblade wielders, Eraqus and Xehanort's master. Lucky for me, it doesn't change anything. Oh, and did you know Ryuko has a guitar? It's mentioned in Chapter 14.1.

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/0/00/ED1_GnIjI20.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/650?cb=20140717081357]

"You want to grab something to eat?"

"Uh... huh?"

"I'm starving and I don't want to be here when these guys - " she pointed towards the unconscious monsters, " - wake up."

"But weren't we - "

"Yeah, so what?" she shrugged, giving her best 'look who you're talking to' look, "It's either lunch or I beat the snot out of you. Or both. Your choice."

Demyx briefly hesitated, "Alright, but can we get Doria?"

"Ugh, fine, sure, but you're paying."

"... what?"

"And give me that coat!"

As she stared at the bubbling something inside a cheap plastic bowl, Ryuko's eyebrows twitched.

The five-eyed monster had called it Doria.

But the colors were wrong. And it smelled awful, like old gym socks mixed with fresh sewage. And she was certain something had moved when she poked the corner of the bowl with her fork. A shudder rippled down her spine. She licked her lips, swallowing the bile bubbling in her throat. She might be brave enough to leap headfirst into darkness. But this? Ryuko shivered again. Mako's mom's mystery croquettes might have looked disgusting, but love and care had been baked into every delicious bite. Yet *this*? THIS!? She might not have eaten real food since pickpocketing Gilgamesh in Agrabah, but nothing in the realm of light, not even infinite money or power, could make her raise so much as a fork-full to her mouth.

She'd rather fight the Cloud of Darkness.

Blindfolded.

Without a Keyblade.

And if Demyx's slightly green cheeks meant anything, she wasn't the only one too keen on tasting Monstropolis's local cuisine.

"So -" the word rolled around Ryuko's mouth as she cautiously poked a chunk of curdled rice, desperate to avoid focusing on the food. What the hell was wrong with this world? Why did the fruit taste fine but the food look and smell like crap? On the bright side, Demyx had been courteous enough to let her wear his spare coat. So, there was that, " - a sitar, huh?"

"She's not a - "

The instinctive rebuttal faltered almost immediately. Sitting a foot or two away from one of the Organization's greatest enemies, who could kill him in the blink of an eye, on a bench in the middle of a mostly empty Gross Park thanks to the approaching thunderstorm, untouched so-called food cooling dead center on his lap, it took Demyx's mind a few seconds to catch up to his ears. And when it

did, he stared at Ryuko like she *hadn't* transformed into a monster with razor-sharp fangs, claws and an expression, no matter her mood, that made it seem as if she was ready to go on a bloody rampage across town.

"Err, sorry about that. It's just... uh..." he rubbed the back of his neck, fingers slowly moving back and forth, "... most people..."

"... don't know the difference?"

Ryuko yawned, exposing fangs sharp enough to tear through flesh and bone, before snapping her mouth shut with an unnerving *crunch* and adjusting her grip on Threadcutter, which remained propped between her thighs, "I got an electric bass back at my place. An original Azureglo Rickenbacker. Four-strings. Left-handed. Cost a pretty penny. Had to outbid shitty nobles who thought it was an 'antique decorative instrument' or some stupid bullcrap."

That wasn't an exaggeration.

It had cost a lot of money.

Three million, five hundred thousand Gil, to be exact.

She couldn't remember how she learned about the Rickenbacker. Maybe Satsuki told her. Or Mako heard about it. The 'how' didn't matter. Or the where or when. What was important was that a guitar - a left-handed, four-string *Azureglo Rickenbacker* with a dual-truss rod system, at that - not only survived the Heartless destroying their world without so much as a scratch but ended up on auction at the Lindblum Auction. And no matter how much it cost, millions of Gil included, she was going to buy it. Which explained Satsuki why offered to do the bidding. For her. And she'd agreed. At first. Because dealing with stuck-up nobles with sticks up their collective asses wasn't her thing most days of the week. Even Beatrix had her limits.

But after half an hour in the back row of the auction house on a chair far too comfortable and plush, eyebrow twitching as assholes draped in curtains and gaudy clothes talked about how displaying the guitar in their foyers as a decorative instrumental piece, she'd decided enough was enough and took a more hand-on approach.

Triple the previous bid.

Much to Satsuki's embarrassment.

"But it was totally worth it," practicing was one of her few hobbies not involving the Keyblade. And damn it, she'd raise hell if *anything* happened to that Rickenbacker, "I got a guitar and flipped off some rich assholes."

"Yeah, but a sitar's way harder than a guitar," tossing the Doria into the trashcan next to the bench, Demyx wiped rice - or something he hoped was rice - off his hands before bringing out Arpeggio. Of course, that drew Ryuko's attention. Especially after she sliced it apart with one those scary Scissor Blades, "I mean, four strings are *waaay* easier to master. One per finger per string. Try twenty strings. It gets really complicated, really fast."

"Eh..."

Ryuko's neck popped as she begrudgingly accepted his point, "Whatever. Sure. Fine. But start playing crap and I'm going to shove that sitar up your ass."

She didn't need to exaggerate.

Demyx *knew* she would - and could - do it.

"Still, gonna admit, you're not half-bad," sniffing the Doria, Ryuko hoped it smelled better with age. But it didn't. Not even as she chucked it into the trashcan, "Must've practiced your ass off."

The compliment threw Demyx completely through a loop.

He didn't know how to react.

One moment Ryuko was about to deliver the finishing blow and the next she was offering to have lunch like nothing happened.

Was this a dream? An elaborate illusion? When was the other shoe going to drop?

"Man, this sounds awkward, but you're the first person to compliment my immense musical talents," technically, that was a lie. Xion was the first to recognize how great of a musician he truly was. The others didn't care, thought it was annoying or ignored him. Which was fine in his book. Less attention meant less watchful eyes. And less scrutiny meant more time to relax and slack off, "All my friends think I'm wasting my time. 'Oh, Demyx, put that thing away and go back to work! You've got a mission! Don't make me turn you into a Dusk! Get moving!' Blegh! Nobody appreciates genuine talent. Everybody thinks they can just pick up any old instrument and know how to play."

"Tch," Ryuko propped her arms over the back of her bench, "They don't sound like friends."

"They're not so bad once you get to know them," Demyx strummed two strings before stopping mid-note, "Soooo, who was she?"

"Huh?"

"You know, *her*," now that he wasn't throwing everything plus the kitchen sink at Ryuko in the hopes of slowing her down long enough to escape, Demyx couldn't understand Xigbar's worry. Or why everyone called her a monster or something. Granted, she *looked* like one. But that aside, she wasn't the eldritch force of nature Vexen warned them about. They were still enemies. And she'd probably threaten him again. But for the moment? Shifting Arpeggio until the sitar rested on his lap, he searched for the right words, "The musician you said was better than me. How good was she? Like

'awesome to the max' or 'genius good' or 'better than you in every way'? I'm dying to know."

Ryuko seriously considered the question.

Like hell she was going to confess her life story to a total stranger. Especially a total stranger without a shred of remorse in his body. Demyx still hadn't apologized for attacking those monsters. The only reason he was acting so nice was because she stopped threatening to beat him to a bloody pulp. And because if he so much as looked at her funny, she wouldn't hold anything back. Which was fine in her book.

"She had a real high opinion of herself," the marching band. Senketsu's comments about a cheerful entrance. That stupid song. Even eleven years in the future, Ryuko could remember every excruciating detail, "Bragged about pummeling me 'cheerfully, jauntily, and utterly one-sidedly," she sneered, matching Jakuzure's high-pitched voice as much as possible, "Up until I jammed one of those stupid clarinet missiles straight up her ass."

"Come on..." Demyx tried brushing aside Ryuko's clearly exaggerated story. But to her credit, there were a few weird Heartless and lesser Nobodies. Plus, she wasn't exactly the most normal person, "You're not kidding, are you? Ugh, geez, talk about a nightmare. Guess it's a good thing we're done fighting because I don't have the energy to think about something like that."

Ryuko gave him a look.

A scary look.

"Wha... seriously, I'm not lying this time," the Melodious Nocturne raised his hands defensively, "Sure, maybe that Nui whatever person was totally made up. By me. Because I seriously have no idea who she is. But someone did take my coat. Err, the one you're wearing. Which I *really* need back once you're finished. If, uh, you don't mind giving it back."

Ryuko's glare hardened, "Alright, wiseass, mind explaining how you knew about my Scissor Blades?"

"Who doesn't?" Demyx turned his head, shrugging nonchalantly only to quickly backpedal when Ryuko seemed angrier than normal, "Um, alright, maybe I shouldn't have tried taking them. But I didn't even know you were here! And then were just lying around!"

"And the monsters?"

"*They* attacked me first," the absence of a heart and genuine emotions associated with said heart didn't prevent him from feeling insulted by the insinuation. And a tad concerned by how close Ryuko's fingers were to her Keyblade, "Oh, right, you were there, weren't you?" he'd nearly forgotten. Ryuko had been there. Struggling over the exact verbiage needed to keep his head attached to his shoulders for the next few minutes, Demyx drew in a sharp breath before turning towards the impatient master, "But I didn't kill them! Just... um... kicked their butts. So, um, guess that answers all your questions, right?"

"Nope."

Ryuko almost found Demyx's nervousness cute as her fingers slipped further down Threadcutter, "You tried to kill me. And worse, you attacked innocent people. I ain't about to forget that. Or forgive you," emphasizing her point with a deep-throated snarl originating within the pit of her stomach, she allowed a trace of vermilion light to twist and dance around her Keyblade before tilting her head rightward and grinning, "But you're in luck. I'm in an awfully generous mood, which means all you need to do to avoid wondering what it's like to live without arms or legs is answer a simple question."

Demyx didn't like where Ryuko was heading, but with little choice in the matter, grimaced, "Uuhhh... okay...?"

A moment passed.

Thunder rumbled overhead. The smell of rain lingered in the air. Sitting on a bench in the middle of Gross Park next to someone she'd tried killing less than an hour ago, and who had done everything possible to turn her into a bloody smear on the pavement, Ryuko grabbed Demyx's permission, ran with it as far as humanly possible, turned towards the pain in the ass and cut to the chase in an indifferent tone at odds with the pressure pressing upon the nervous Nobody's shoulders, "What are you?"

The sheer normalcy, not only in the way Ryuko asked the question but her honest curiosity, threw Demyx's mind through several quick and confusing loops.

He'd expected questions like 'who do you work for' or 'who is Saïx' or even 'where is your secret base.' Questions he really didn't want to answer. Not like he really had a choice since Ryuko was fast enough to catch him if he tried escaping through a corridor of darkness, strong enough to kick his butt if he tried anything funny and smart enough to know he wouldn't betray the Organization. He would have thought of something. Maybe a convincing story that seemed like the truth. Or make up some nonsense about Saïx. Like the guy was seriously strong.

Not something so personal.

His fingers slipped on Arpeggio, releasing an incredibly off-key-note, "... huh... what?"

"You look human, but you're not human, are you? You're something else," if Demyx expected an explanation, he remained blissfully stupid. Or ignorant. Or both. Ryuko really couldn't find the motivation to care about his feelings, "Something different. Not a Heartless. But something steeped in darkness."

"Oh, man, talk about a personal question..."

Demyx didn't quite know how to respond to someone pointing out he was a Nobody simply by smelling him. And he'd thought Zexion's

bizarre talent for telling people apart by their scents was weird, "I'm offended you think I'm anything *but* human. I mean, really, that's insulting."

In hindsight, that *might* not have been the smartest thing to say.

But to his good fortune, Ryuko didn't seem angry.

"Sorry," grumbling in the back of her throat, which sounded like rocks in a tumbler thanks to her larger jaw and rows of teeth, Ryuko ran a hand through her disheveled hair.

Beatrix always said not to judge a book by its cover. The universe was huge. Light. Darkness. No matter how pure, a heart contained both. With seven unique exceptions. She'd fought assholes who unleashed light. She met people who wielded darkness as naturally as breathing yet were overbearingly friendly. Craning her head back, Ryuko stared at the thunderous clouds gathering overhead with perspective most people lacked. Balance was the key to everything. She wasn't arrogant enough to believe she was close to perfect. Darkness weighed her heart. But she accepted that. Her problems... her issues... her weaknesses... she understood and accepted her faults and failures because those things made her who she was.

But who was she to say he wasn't human?

Not her.

"Personally, I don't care if you're human or not. That's not for me to say," folding her arms, Ryuko leaned backwards until her spine matched the bench's curvature, "But you and your goons caused a lot trouble. Trouble I'll need help cleaning up," her attention snapped towards the Nobody, "Don't you think so?"

The unspoken threat lingered on the humid autumn air.

"I... uh... yeah, probably..."

Hoping to distract himself, Demyx strummed Arpeggio, but all that emerged were several terribly offkey notes, which only made things worse. Terrific. Out of the frying pan and into the fire. This was one of those oh-so-common moments where he wished he hadn't gotten out of bed even if that meant incurring Saïx's unbridled wrath, "I guess, well, I'm what you might call a Nobody."

"A Nobody?"

The brisk wind rushing through the park did little to mask Ryuko's incredulousness. Turning towards the Nobody, her head tilted sideways, lips slightly parted and one eyebrow raised higher than the other. She couldn't quite put her finger on it. Call it a hunch. Or intuition. Or experience. But she was pretty damn certain Demyx had capitalized that word, "So, you're unpopular or something?"

"Uuuuhh..." a failed attempt at words defined Demyx's initial reaction towards her question.

Not that Ryuko could blame him.

Beneath the same poker face that suckered Gamagori out of twenty thousand Gil in a high-stakes poker match, which ended with Mako guilting her into giving the guy back his money and then some because it was their 'honeymoon savings,' she stared at the confused Nobody, searching for newfound deceit. Of course, she pretended like she meant every word of her bullshit question. Because that's what it was - one hundred percent crap. Complete crap. But Demyx didn't know that. As long as he was stupid enough to think his little play on words nonsense pulled the wool over her eyes, he'd keep talking. And talking.

And talking until he spilled something important.

Hopefully.

As strong as she was, and she was pretty goddamn strong, planning was different. She *sucked* at planning. Long-term strategizing gave

her headaches. Improvising? Coming up with an insanely risky yet highly rewarding plan on the fly while dodging magic, spheres of darkness and the ground literally breaking underneath them? She could do that with both arms tied behind her back and blindfolded. But when your sister constantly plans twenty moves ahead while playing both sides and convincing everyone she was losing until suddenly, out of god damn nowhere, an entirely different plan nobody but nobody expected slaps you across the face, you tended to pick up a thing or two.

Not much.

But still enough to trick a naïve moron.

"... yeah?" blind to the thoughts circulating through the master's heart, Demyx coughed, "You got me. It's really hard to believe considering how awesome I am, but I'm not the most popular guy back home. A real nobody. Cause no matter if it's my fault of Larxene's, I'm always getting blamed by Saïx."

"Some friends."

Folding her hands behind her neck, Ryuko stared at the overcast skies over Monstropolis, sarcasm dripping from her heart. What a load of crap. Demyx's absurd story sounded really convincing. But a lie, no matter how convincing, remained a lie. Nothing, not even Mako, could change that. But she got another name. Another important piece of information. And that meant putting up with more of his pathetic nonsense, "Can't imagine why you put up with them."

"It's complicated," Demyx motioned with his hand in some vague expression before shrugging and shifting Arpeggio from one knee to the other, "But they're not so bad once you get to know them. Saïx might have the whole 'emotionless rage' perfected to a science, but he's way nicer than Larxene. And Xemnas."

"Xemnas?"

Uncrossing her legs, Ryuko repeated the name, dragging it across the tip of her tongue, "Xemnas..."

If he'd been a little more aware or possessed the benefit of hindsight, Demyx would have noticed Ryuko's curiosity.

"Hey, if it's not too much trouble, can I ask a favor?" caught up in the moment, completely blind to the master's sudden interest in Xemnas, whose name he should not have mentioned on fear of being turned into a Dusk or worse, Demyx plucked Arpeggio, "Do you think, if she's cool with it, Satsuki could sign my limited-edition Festival of Champions poster? I know she didn't participate. Or go. But the value will go through the roof if someone like her signs - "

Swish!

Ryuko heard it coming.

Like hundreds of pieces of paper caught on the wind.

And darkness.

She didn't think, merely reacted. Instincts guided her movements. As soon as the familiar sensation associated with 'someone throwing around darkness' prickled along the length of her spine, Ryuko launched herself forward, Threadcutter grasped between her fingers. Clearing nearly three times her height in a single leap, she flipped over a picnic table dedicated to some philanthropic monster who donated a shit-ton of money to the city, turned around mid-flight and violently *shoved* her boot against the weathered wooden structure, sending it crashing towards the source of darkness behind her.

There was a loud crash.

Wood splintered.

But Ryuko was already moving.

And so was whoever dodged the picnic table.

Sprinting sideways across Gross Park, navy blue and crimson hair fluttering in front of narrowed eyes, she waited until the last moment before stabbing Threadcutter into the dirt. An insane and unexpected decision nobody expected. Not her. Not Demyx. And not whoever decided to crash the party. Yet she didn't leave her Keyblade behind. Holding onto the ruby handle, keychain jingling violently as the basic laws of physics tried dragging her forward. But Ryuko refused, planting one boot against the ground and instantaneously arresting her momentum. Clawed blanching pale green tightening to the point metal sung, vermilion light flowing from her heart and teeth bared into a snarl, Ryuko *ripped* her Keyblade out of the dirt.

"METEOR SHOT!!!"

A massive sphere of flames exploded from Threadcutter.

Only to dissipate against what she swore were shimmering playing cards larger than herself.

"Great," behind the smoking teeth of her Keyblade, which was still pointed at the stranger, mouth twitching and brow furrowed, Ryuko didn't bother hiding her annoyance, "How many of you coat-wearing freaks are there?"

"Freak?"

Obscured by the impenetrable shadows accompanying his garments, Luxord's expression settled into firm discontent. A bluff? Or perhaps a call? Either or, he was not foolish enough to presume himself equal to Ryuko. Perhaps a match for her particularly witty repartee, but nothing more. Her attack had been half-formed. A snap decision in the heat of battle. An instinctive counter. Yet one powerful enough to strain his defenses nearly to the point of breaking. Given sufficient opportunity, he held little doubt she would undoubtedly unleash stronger and more impressive techniques. Ones sufficiently game-breaking not even the tightest rules could tilt the game in his favor

"Now, there's little need for such crude language," wood cracked underneath the gambler's boots as he walked over the shattered remains of an innocent picnic table, "I've not come to fight you."

"Oh, yeah?"

Snorting out the side of her mouth, Ryuko lowered Threadcutter just enough to glare at the newest pain in her ass, "I find that *really* hard to believe."

"It's a matter of perspective. But to assuage your well-founded suspicions, perhaps this - " shuffling cards back and forth between his hands, Luxord chose one at random. A particular card from the center of the pile while vanishing the rest. And upon doing so, brought said card to his veiled face, flipped it around and showed it to the transformed master, " - might prove my intent."

The detailed picture of Demyx on the card, mullet and all, deflated Ryuko's annoyance.

"Neat trick," Ryuko chanced a quick glance towards the bench, where Demyx was no longer sitting, "You do requests?"

It was a rhetorical question.

Looking back at the newest surprise of the day, she rotated her shoulder, stretching bones and muscles until a satisfying *pop* reached her ears. This guy, whoever he was, was probably a Nobody Just like Demyx. One with different abilities. Cards instead of music. And going further, she'd bet her house they belonged to the same exclusive club. Which meant someone important, maybe Saïx or Xemnas, sent him to shut Demyx up before he blurted something important. Which meant Demyx knew something important. Something important enough to risk everything just to shut him down.

"On second thought, you don't need to answer that," carnivorous excitement twisted Ryuko's mouth into a Cheshire-like smirk as she

pointed Threadcutter towards the unfortunate son of a bitch, who seemed oddly relaxed despite the threat, "Because if Demyx ain't around, you're gonna have to do!"

"Ah, not so fast."

Before the master could make good on her unspoken promise of enhanced interrogation, Luxord chuckled, "I've yet to make my move."

Ryuko wasn't stupid enough to let him finish.

Pushing off the ground, dirt and grass exploding upwards in her wake, she launched herself towards the stranger. In seconds, she'd all but closed the distance between them. In only a breath-stealing moment, the heartbeat between glimpses of time too quick for the average heart to fathom let alone comprehend, crimson-gold light accentuated every curve, her Keyblade connected with clothing.

Or tried to.

Only to hit nothing but far too many playing cards to count.

"Damn it," turning around, following the scent of darkness to where she'd been standing, Ryuko chewed the inside of her cheek, "Well aren't you just full of surprises."

"The fun is only beginning," arms folded, one hand caressing his chin, the bastard sounded smug as shit, "It would be a shame if the game ended too quickly."

When the freak snapped his fingers, Ryuko grasped Threadcutter with both hands, shoulders tightening and one foot sliding backwards along the ground. One after another, massive cards twice her height, all bearing the same vaguely familiar symbol seen on Demyx's goons, manifested from darkness.

"Wow..." her disheveled hair worsening from the static clinging to the air, Ryuko tried acting surprised. Or shocked. Or anything at the goddamn playing cards floating several inches above the grass. A nearly perfect circle of cards centered on her. But she couldn't fake something that stupid, "If we're gonna do this, guess it's time I cut the cards!"

"An exceptionally risky move."

Surrounded by identical circles of cards, neither side displaying numbers or suits, Luxord gently wagged his finger, "You could ignore the rules, but fair warning - cheating of any sort shan't be tolerated, whether by your hand or my own. If you desire to proceed, then by all means, do so. Just be wary of the consequences."

Irritated and more than a little frustrated, Ryuko nevertheless lowered Threadcutter, "Who are you people?"

"As hesitant as I am to divulge such privileged information, the rules of the game nevertheless dictate my fate," settling into a familiar posture, the gambling Nobody grimaced. There was no leaving the table. The odds were stacked severely against him. He was playing against an adversary more than willing to cheat at the first opportunity. One false move and he would not see another dawn, "The rules are simple. You win, I must truthfully answer one of your questions. If I win, you answer must truthfully answer one of my questions. What say you, Ryuko? Up for a game of chance?"

"A game?"

Ryuko smelled something wafting from the bastard. And it wasn't darkness. No, it was bullshit. But as much as she wanted to screw whatever rules he was talking about, she refrained from throwing caution to the wind. And her Keyblade at his face, "Alright, let's play..."

Last edited: Jun 18, 2020

Chapter 19.5

"Master Odin will be arriving to speak with Her Majesty tomorrow. Please try to behave yourself. I understand you're curious, but his beard is not an affectation."

- Master Madelene Branford to a fourteen year old Celes Cheres on the eve of Master Odin visiting Brahne Raza Alexandros XVI

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["I'm certain he shall receive everything that's coming to him."](#)

Once Aqua finished her incredulous story, which began with confronting Xehanort on Hollow Bastion and ending with Gilgamesh rescuing her from the darkness in an uncharacteristic act of utter selfishness, Yen Sid addressed the complicated situation as delicately as possible. Yet despite wishing to know more, he held his tongue, choosing respectful silence instead of pestering the long presumed lost master with superfluous questions. Although his expression remained passive, brows knitted together and fingers steeped, his mind hurried with utmost haste. The details were imaginative yet explained everything, including Ryuko's absence these last few weeks.

And the overwhelming clash of light and darkness, whose reverberations echoed across the worlds.

To leap into the Realm of Darkness in pursuit of his former apprentice, Gilgamesh at her side and nothing but her heart for guidance, was expected of Ryuko. Maturity hadn't tempered her determination nor reduced her desire to 'fight first and ask questions later,' as Ira Gamagori had so eloquently stated some years ago.

But to destroy the Cloud of Darkness, a creature as old as time itself and believed invincible?

Even after all this time, Ryuko was still discovering new and incredible ways of proving impossible was nothing more than another word.

"Mickey isn't one to renege on promises. But Gilgamesh's avaricious insistence on rewards for good behavior aside, though I dare not presume to understand what you've experienced since that unfortunate day, let us not understate your tremendous accomplishments," twilight perpetually purple and blue, stars stretching from white to red twinkling in the darkened heavens, filtered through the windows behind Yen Sid as he slouched, mouth pursed into a frown, "Not only have you successfully prevented an immense effusion of Heartless from the greater darkness, by closing the Door to Darkness, worlds long consumed by the Heartless have begun restoring themselves to their rightful places."

On the other side of his desk, appearing as if she'd collapse any second, Aqua did not resist when he subtly 'pushed' her into a comfortable chair with a pinch of magic.

"... the Cloud of Darkness..." the fatigued master struggled to find the right words, "It wasn't a normal Heartless, was it?"

"Indeed, you are correct," a modicum of worry graced the sorcerer's wizened expression, not at the question, although it was a terrible one, but the painful memories of his struggles against the Heartless during Xehanort's conclusive descent into madness and utter sociopathy, "Long before Xehanort roused it from its slumber, before the age of fairy tales, legend speaks of a creature whose arrival suffocated light and hope beneath an encompassing cloud of absolute darkness. Awakening randomly, lacking rhyme nor reason, its power beyond imagination, the Cloud of Darkness would scour the world before vanishing. In essence, it was less a Heartless and more an unstoppable force of nature."

Aqua's lips curled into the faintest semblance of a smile, "Too bad nobody told Ryuko."

"Yes," Yen Sid conceded, not with annoyance, but rather curiosity, "Are you absolutely certain she does not remember how she destroyed the Cloud of Darkness?"

The question, more of a gentle inquiry than outright command, lingered before Aqua shook her head.

"Hmm," stroking his beard, Yen Sid grumbled from the pit of his stomach, "Perhaps her heart has sealed away the memory."

A surprised gasp passed through Aqua's lips, "What do you mean?"

"Do you remember the immense light Ryuko unleashed ten years ago during your battle against Master Xehanort and Ardyn Lucis Caelum?" Yen Sid's voice deepened, addressing not the question Aqua asked but the one her heart wished to know, "A heart, no matter how strong, possesses limits. A natural barrier to prevent it from shattering."

Aqua's fingernails dug into her skin.

She remembered.

All too well.

"When Ardyn attempted to drown her heart with darkness, Ryuko countered with a phenomenal outburst of light, successfully destroying him but severely damaging her heart in the process. A scar which lasted nearly an entire month," the erstwhile master's brows furrowed while conflicted emotions raged across Aqua's weary face. How foolish of him. He'd been so intent on explaining the past that he'd overlooked what stood in the present. The mantle of responsibility placed upon his shoulders was a heavy burden, but that didn't mean he must be uncaring and coldly pragmatic.

Steeping his fingers, Yen Sid's thoughts turned upon themselves.

Years of struggling to maintain relative peace and tranquility across the Realm of Light while the Heartless and darkness slowly consumed everything had left him jaded. More than a little pessimistic they would not find the Door to Darkness before it was too late. But that was in the past. The doors were closed thanks to Ryuko, Mickey, Aqua, Sora, Riku and even Gilgamesh, to some minimal extent.

And for that, he was eternally in their debt.

"Forgive me, Master Aqua, I did not intend on reminding you of such painful and raw memories," an apology was merely words. But he meant every single one of them, "But it is my belief that Ryuko, when confronted by the Cloud of Darkness, once more tapped into that immense power. Consciously or instinctively I cannot say. Over the intervening years, Ryuko has demonstrated the impossible was quite possible. Only this time, perhaps seeking to prevent a terrible recurrence, her heart immediately sealed away the memories before they inflicted immeasurable damage in a place where a lapse of judgement could lead to a fate far worse than death."

Nothing was said for several seconds.

"I'm glad..." Aqua stumbled over the words in her mind before steadying herself, "... I'm just glad she's alright," time passed with neither rhyme nor reason, a welcoming phenomenon after years of traversing never-ending darkness. Confronted by the incessant beating of her weary heart, head tilted forward until she was staring at her feet, she swallowed the lump choking her throat, "But knowing she might still be there, trapped inside the darkness... I can't... I have to help her... I have to help them..."

Yen Sid did not interrupt Aqua.

"Aqua, you mustn't hope to accomplish everything on your own," it wasn't chastisement as much as a reminder that no heart, powerful

or otherwise, is invincible. Xehanort's power was immense. His knowledge unrivaled. Yet Ryuko and Terra, through friendship and teamwork, managed to drive him to his knees. And most likely would have defeated him if Ardyn Lucis Caelum had not arrived at the last moment, "If you required assistance, all you need to do is ask."

A pinch of magic.

A brush of childish wonder.

A mote of delight, music and imagination.

As the metaphysical ingredients precipitated into something vaguely resembling smoke hued multiple impossible colors above his desk, Yen Sid carefully pierced through the perilous veil separating the worlds, manipulating magic and reality as easily as one grasped an abstract concept or introspective thought, "Now then, let us see what my magic reveals..."

With nary any fanfare, the nebulous magic coalesced into a picture clearer than any painting.

"Hmm... it appears Sora and the King's companions are safe and sound," although relieved, Yen Sid maintained his composure as his magic showed Sora, Donald and Goofy travelling a well-worn dirt road cutting through a field of endless grass. The boy was laughing. And Donald, despite appearing annoyed by something childish, looked towards the knight-captain for guidance, "The Mi'ihen Highroads? Unexpected. I shall inform Sir Auron to expect Sora to arrive in Luca within the next two to three days."

Aqua couldn't have collapsed any further into her chair than she already was.

"What about Ryuko? Mickey? And Riku?" the names rolled off her tongue faster and faster, racing alongside her heart.

The erstwhile master said nothing, merely nodding while once more piercing the veil with outstretched fingers, an open mind and heart wary of darkness. Yet despite his prodigious talents, something obscured his vision, rending his magic impotent. Enunciating his innermost frustration with a soft grumble, he furrowed his brows and frowned. For both Riku and Mickey to remain hidden, one of two possible answers stood before them. Or rather, two branching scenarios along the same path. When the Door to Darkness was shut, both young Riku and Mickey had been on the other side. More than likely, they remained lost inside the darkness, which naturally interfered with his magic.

Or, equally plausible, Ryuko was with them.

Possibly both.

"I'm afraid my magic cannot reach them," Yen Sid solemnly shook his head, "They are beyond my sight."

Aqua stared into the dark smoke, searching for something - anything - that made sense, "What do you mean?"

"A simple question with an exceedingly complicated answer," although he was certain Ryuko would not blame him for sharing such secrets with Aqua, Yen Sid decided it was best for him to err on the side of caution when it came to such personal things, "But you need not worry yourself over this matter," dismissing the scattered magic clinging to the desk with a nonchalant wave of his hand through the stuffy air, he leaned backwards and steeped his fingers, mouth creased into a firm glower, "For I'm certain their stay in the darkness will be significantly shorter than yours."

Confusion swept through Aqua's heart.

However, before she could grant life to the questions spiraling throughout her heart, Yen Sid continued.

"To locate a key to darkness you need a key to light. Mickey told you these words, did he not?" at Aqua's reaction, an exhausted nod, he folded his hands together, the cooling autumn breeze whispering through the shaped windows, "I shall admit he far exceeded my wildest expectations. Yet his research was incomplete. Although the blame cannot be placed onto his shoulders. Very few sources speak of the Realm of Darkness. And fewer mention the secrets lurking where the hearts of men fear to explore. I'm impressed he went to Gilgamesh for assistance getting into the darkness, but if he was relying upon that arrogant mountain of avarice and greed to escape, I must presume Mickey was not aware of the innate power lurking within the key he sought."

Eternal twilight filtered through the shaped windows behind the former master as he raised a single hand, magic of purest blue streaming between wrinkled fingers.

"Most Keyblades are connected to hearts and worlds," an ancient tome, orange leather worn almost auburn by the relentless passage of time, floated through the air, pages magically flipping one after another before coming to rest on his desk, "Yet there exist Keyblades linked not to light, but darkness. Not good. Nor evil. Merely different. A natural balance to the Keyblades protecting the worlds. But this difference, however small, is why I'm confident the King shall eventually deduce the means to escape the Realm of Darkness alongside Ryuko and Riku."

Aqua stared at the sketched drawing of a simplistic Keyblade, recognition running rampant through her heart.

Yet something suffocated the relief, drawing forth concerns and worries.

"Master Yen Sid," the words sat upon her tongue, rough as cotton and equally as unforgiving, "That other creature... why did it..."

"I'm afraid my knowledge concerning such creatures is inadequate. They are not Heartless. Nor are they the Unversed you remember,"

its purpose completed, the tome disappeared in a puff of blue smoke, returning to its spot upon the shelf, nary a speck of dust disturbed during its brief removal.

The silence pressed upon Yen Sid's weary shoulder.

"However, considering Ryuko more than likely took care of the problem, I do not see any reason to further discuss the matter," closing his eyes, Yen Sid focused not on Life Fibers but the current predicament. He was no fool. He did not presume such a horrible creature was unique. If he took Satsuki's information into consideration, the question was not *who* sent such a monster, but why. And for what nefarious reason, "If you desire to know more, speak with Satsuki. I'm certain she'll tell you everything you need to know."

Something resembling consternation crossed the long-since retired master's expression before just as quickly transforming into somber acceptance.

"Now, we'd long presumed Ventus rested within the walls of your old home," plucking his lower lip, Yen Sid's thoughts turned inward, "But without Eraqus's Keyblade, rousing Ventus's heart from its slumber will prove impossible."

"I - " Aqua struggled, searching for an answer that did not exist, "Terra. Ven. When I was trapped in the darkness, their light gave me hope. And Ryuko..." faded memories as clear as day whispered to her heart. A house in the darkness. A snapshot into the past. A picture of three friends"... she never stopped trying to help me. That's why I can't give up... not without trying..."

"Then our path forward is clear."

A modicum of concern dwelt within Yen Sid's heart. Xehanort's Heartless. The Cloud of Darkness. Maleficent desiring the Seven Princesses of Heart. And now, years after she'd been presumed destroyed, Nui Harime. It could not be coincidence such things were

happening nearly simultaneously, "To rouse Ventus from his slumber, we must first locate Eraqus's Keyblade," as the topic shifted towards something far less heartwarming, he sighed forcing himself to remain emotionless and calm, "As for Terra - I'm afraid such a task might be exceedingly more difficult."

"I don't care," gently cupping her hands together between her thighs, Aqua swallowed her fear, "No matter what it takes, I'll save them."

"Although I am relieved darkness has not dampened your love for your friends nor dulled the light of your heart, we mustn't get ahead of ourselves," leaning forward, Yen Sid allowed himself a moment's pause together his thoughts and assess the situation. Xehanort. They'd known Terra's fate long before Aqua spoke of the matter with such vivid detail. It was only by the terrible grace of coincidence Hollow Bastion had plunged into darkness before Mickey could speak of what he'd learned from Ansem the Wise to Ryuko, "It will take some time to discern the location of Eraqus's Keyblade. Which brings us to another matter..."

Observing Aqua's left arm, specifically what was missing, his brows creased into a frown.

"... while I understand your reasoning, specifically concerning Gilgamesh's refusal to assist more than absolutely necessary, your heart is still recuperating from spending an exorbitant amount of time inside the Realm of Darkness," that Aqua managed to sustain herself for nearly ten years in the Realm of Darkness was testament not only to the innermost strength of her heart, but the resolve to save her friends from Xehanort, "I do not recommend you repeat such a foolish and risky endeavor."

He did not need to elaborate his point.

"Thus, I suggest speaking with the three good fairies," hands folded inside his sleeves, conical hat tipping forward ever-so-slightly until it came to rest above his eyebrows, he observed Aqua's eyes alight with recognition. Ah, yes, how could he have forgotten? She had met

them before. On a world once plagued by Maleficent's darkness and visited by a kleptomaniacal acquiescence, "They are currently staying in my former laboratory," he motioned towards a previously concealed door to his left, "Once they have your measurements, they'll be able to provide you with vestments capable of protecting your heart from darkness."

There was more he could say.

But that was neither here nor there.

"Considering they aren't quite as talented as Moodon and tend to argue over every detail, no matter how insignificant," a shudder threatened to engulf Yen Sid's heart as the terrible memory. He would never understand how anyone could get so invested into clothing. Nevertheless, maintaining his composure and stature, he breathed deeply, "It might take them several hours. However, once you've spoken with them, I suggest you rest for the evening."

A small part of Aqua's heart wanted to refuse his offer.

But another, larger portion knew he was right.

She was in no condition to search for Terra or Ven.

And Yen Sid knew this.

"You needn't worry," he understood Aqua's desire to save Terra and Ventus. But she was pushing her heart and body to their limits. Darkness still suffused her heart. He could sense shadows clinging to her emotions, twisting them into dark caricatures of themselves. While her determination was impressive, she needed to rest. And thus, raising a hand, he waved towards the deceptively heavy door behind her, which opened as if drawn by an invisible string, "Nothing will happen in the next eight hours that cannot wait until after a good night's sleep."

Last edited: Jun 26, 2020

Chapter 19.6

So, you might notice the opening paragraphs are a complete rewrite of the previous section's ending. It was necessary. First, I didn't like what I'd written. And second, it didn't flow seamlessly into what I wanted to write. Anyway, this was a hard fight to write because Luxord's attacks are all based on games of chance, which makes 'show versus tell' difficult because, at some point, the reader must be told what's going on. But I think I managed to pull it off in the end.

[img:

[https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/8/88/Strategic_Moves_01_KHIIIRM.png/800px-Strategic_Moves_01_KHIIIRM.png\]](https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/8/88/Strategic_Moves_01_KHIIIRM.png/800px-Strategic_Moves_01_KHIIIRM.png)

"On second thought, don't answer that!" swinging Threadcutter towards the enigmatic bastard, slicing through air and bullshit alike, carnivorous excitement contorted Ryuko's mouth into a Cheshire-like smirk, "Because if Demyx ain't around to talk, you'll just have to do!"

"Such bravado..."

Undeterred by the vow concerning enhanced interrogation and whatever punishments Ryuko's impressive imagination could weave into reality, Luxord calmly stroked his chin, "... yet one shouldn't get ahead of themselves so early in the game. After all, I've yet to make my opening move."

Ryuko *reacted* before he'd finished.

Dirt and grass exploding from the aftershock, floating for less than a single heartbeat, the balls of her feet were the first things to separate from the ground.

Pushed forth and buoyed neither by light nor magic, but pure physical prowess, time slowed to an agonizing crawl as Ryuko willed herself into action halfway between the smug and arrogant bastard's

sentences. Hair whipping in front of her face, body tempered by experience and eyes darting back and forth, searching for the slightest deceit, she responded fast enough that her features blurred into a pastiche of colors. Barely touching the grass before pushing her forward at greater and greater speeds, Threadcutter clenched between white-knuckled claws, granting the Keyblade an otherworldly brilliance matched only by the burgeoning crimson light emanating from her feathery hair, she reached the asshole before he could blink.

In a breath-stealing moment too fast for the average heart to fathom, let alone comprehend, Ryuko flipped herself forward, golden-ruby light spilling forth from Threadcutter.

She *swung*.

And more than thirteen flashes of light followed in her wake.

Yet none of them hit anything.

"Tch," as soon as her Keyblade missed, she twisted counterclockwise. Clawed fingers pierced the ground, grasping handfuls of moist dirt, arresting her forward momentum. Her nose twitched at the unmistakably atrocious scent of darkness tracing patterns through the humid air, heralding the suspicious bastard reappearing on one of the picnic tables she *hadn't* destroyed, "Aren't you full of surprises."

"But of course," four cards bearing neither suit nor numbers stood clasped between Luxord's fingers, "It would be quite shameful if our game ended too quickly, wouldn't you agree?"

When the cards suddenly disappeared up his sleeves, Ryuko tightened her stance, slid one foot backwards, raised Threadcutter and prepared herself for whatever bullshit was about to get thrown on her shoulders. After everything, she expected an attack. More than likely something involving exploding cards, or games of chance or something even stupider than that - a game based on Triple Triad.

But what happened completely shattered her expectations.

"Wooooowww..."

As enormous cards appeared around her, floating knee-high above the grass while moving upwards and downwards slowly enough that she watched them for a few seconds before tilting her head backwards and rolling her eyes in a failed attempt to appear interested, Ryuko feigned surprise. Or shock. Or attempted to, because all that came out was something close to disappointment, "... not that I care or anything, but aren't you a little old to be playing Triple Triad?"

"I'm afraid this is no ordinary game of cards."

Encircled by slowly rotating cards identical to the ones which enveloped Ryuko, displaying numbers or suits, merely the splintered, upside-down heart emblazoned upon most lesser Nobodies, Luxord stood up, walking away from his brief perch while ignoring her ingenuous provocation, "The stakes are far higher."

Ryuko's irritation waned into morbid boredom.

"Don't tell me," this was it. This was the beginning of something she'd heard so many times she'd started keeping a list of who said what, "You're about to convince me into agreeing to some high-stakes game of chance, aren't you?" asking a question without really phrasing it as a question, mostly because she already knew the answer, Ryuko deceptively lowered her guard, allowing her to mimic Maleficent's snobbish arrogance, "Sure, you'll probably tell me the rules or convince me it's fair, but you'll hold something back, ensuring I screw up at the worst possible moment to screw up."

The bastard didn't say anything.

Which meant she was right on the money.

"Oh, and a sleazy guy like you probably memorized what's behind each of these stupid cards," emphasizing her point by slashing the nearest card, reducing it to shadowy tatters with a wild swing only to watch it regenerate, Ryuko shifted targets, "So, why should I play your stupid little game instead of simply beating the info out of you?"

"Because the game has already begun."

Ryuko didn't know *what* it was, but something about how the bastard's answer set alight every nerve in her body, "You're bluffing."

"Well now, isn't that an interesting scenario. Perhaps I *am* bluffing. For all you know, this could be nothing more than a means to deceive you into lowering your guard. If that is what you truly believe, go again, attack at your leisure," Luxord's voice carried on the breeze whistling through Gross Park, drawing attention away from the trepidation inherent in talking with someone so undoubtedly strong, "Yet your reluctance to do so implies some measure of doubt. Am I bluffing or am I lulling you into a false sense of security? Will defeating me achieve the desired results, or will innocent bystanders ignorant of our little conversation suffer the consequences? So many questions yet so few answers."

A snort tore its way from Ryuko's throat as she lowered slowly Threadcutter, every inch harder than the last, "Who the hell are you people?"

"As hesitant as I'm to divulge such privileged information, the rules of the game nevertheless dictate my fate," settling into a familiar posture, Luxord swallowed the lump forming in the back of his throat. There was no turning back. He was seated at the table, odds stacked enormously against him and facing an enormously determined adversary more than willing to break every rule in the book to win, "What say you? Up for playing a fair game of chance?"

"Tch... fair!?"

Ryuko snarled. Did he *seriously* think threatening innocent people was fair? She would've laughed at something so ridiculously stupid if the guy didn't set off warning bells inside her heart. Something about him smelled horrible. And it wasn't darkness.

"Fine, have it your way," pissed the hell off, she swept Threadcutter towards the smug asshole, "And when I WIN your stupid game, you're going to tell me everything!"

"Very well..."

A modest genuflection accentuated the caution permeating Luxord's posture, "... let us begin!"

Darkness burst around them. Not as a choking miasma but scintillating shards of crystals long since shattered into myriads of potsherds far too small to count. A veritable maelstrom refracting greyish heavens and tumultuous autumn dying to unleash rain. They were both seated at the table. Two beings which could not be called human. And only one of whom would walk away. With those no-so-comforting thoughts etched firmly in mind, Luxord stretched his arms, unleashing hundreds of cards which quickly settled into a nearly impenetrable barrier.

"A barrier, huh?"

Eyes glued upon the dark shimmer tainting the greyish weather unsettling shades of purple and blue, Ryuko twisted around, head snapping back and forth, before her lips curled into a monstrous smirk, "Guess you're not feeling too confident, are you?"

"In a game of chance, confidence and skill go hand in hand."

Luxord allowed the unstated implications to percolate throughout Ryuko's mind. Confidence was necessary in a game of chance, but against someone like herself, sleight of hand was equally necessary, "Against an opponent of such unmatched prowess and

determination, one must be willing to take any and *all* advantages handed to them..."

FWOOSH!!!

Ryuko craned her head backwards, eyes glued on the basketball-sized spheres suddenly appearing above her head, "The hell are these?"

"Consider them nothing more than a measure of our progress. In this game, the loser of each hand *must* truthfully answer a single question from the winner. No limits, exceptions or boundaries," within the innermost depths of the orbs, brighter than its surroundings yet devouring the light and leaving nothing behind but darkness, a soft humming reached Ryuko's ears. A sound almost as annoying as the bastard's voice when he casually pointed, like she was goddamn blind, to the matching three spheres floating over his shoulders, "But if either of us conceals the truth or refuses to answer, one of them vanishes. Last one standing wins."

The moment he finished speaking, Luxord awaited Ryuko's biting retort.

Yet she said nothing, choosing tranquil silence and annoyance, which unnerved him significantly more than an emotional outburst.

He feigned otherwise in order to maintain composure, but at the end of the day, everything hinged upon Ryuko's acquiescence to the rules. It was that simple. If she decided to stop playing, sacrificing compassion and empathy for the monsters of this strange world in order to take him down, he possessed neither the ace in the hole or wild card necessary to take Ryuko down.

It was laughably cruel, but in the end, everything depended upon Ryuko's good graces.

"Now," allowing Ryuko to see the otherwise normal card between his fingers, Luxord vanished it up his sleeve with a less-than-confident

tone, "Are you familiar with Tod und Leben?"

Ryuko blinked, "... uh?"

"... perhaps you've heard of Bettlemen?"

Head tilted slightly to the left, Ryukos' eyes crossed, "... Battle Men?"

"You might know it as War."

"Why did you say that in the first place!?"unaware, perhaps, they were the same game, Ryuko rolled her eyes.

"... since you're already familiar with the game, I needn't explain the rules," resisting the urge to facepalm was a major effort, Luxord could admit as much. It was frustrating, if he was being truthful. At first glance, Ryuko's ignorance brought to mind Xaldin's reluctance to learn the rules of whichever game they played. Or perhaps, considering who stood across the field, perhaps Larxene's propensity towards cheating at the drop of a hat was a significantly better comparison, "Your cards are composed of the standard thirteen. Aces are high and ties are treated as draws."

"Oh, that's all?"

Sarcasm clinging to her heart, Ryuko picked apart Luxord's explanation for any loopholes, "You're not hiding anything, are you?"

"But of course," sweeping his arm downwards, Luxord summoned three cards to the impromptu arena, "A simple game of chance would be far too boring, wouldn't you agree?"

The cards displayed nothing to set them apart from one another.

Blank on one side, suspiciously familiar symbol stretched across the other.

"If, for whatever reason, either player desires not to answer a question, they may risk everything on a double or nothing," a flick of his fingers stopped the cards, allowing Ryuko and himself to observe the extravagant drawings previously concealed from view. The middle card had two identical version of Threadcutter crossed over each other in front of a stylized heart stained crimson as blood. The remaining two cards, however, displayed Bombs. Not a 'bomb' bomb. But the annoying creatures that lived in the fields outside Alexandria during late spring, "If the loser is down by one, they have a one-in-three chance of doubling the pot, turning their loss into a respectable tie. However, if the loser is down by two, the chances decrease to one-in-four... then one-in-five... and so forth..."

She didn't *need* the detailed, point-by-point boring explanation, but Ryuko still felt like asking the obvious, "Let me guess - hitting a Bomb ain't good."

"A demonstration."

Not-so-near the bench where she'd spent a lot of time weaseling her way into Demyx's heart, down the concrete path and halfway to the fountain showing several monsters screaming at the top of their lungs, stood a tree. Not a particularly large or imposing tree. It didn't resemble anything interesting. It was a good-sized, ordinary tree. A tree planted decades ago by whoever built Gross Park. Or was part of the original forest bulldozed to make way for said park. Coat fluttering in the wind, grass swaying around his boots and traces of darkness clinging to his fingers like water, Luxord caught sight of the tree, which survived countless thunderstorms and blizzards over the years, and smirked.

There was a moment's pause.

A brief lapse in time where nothing happened.

Followed by an appreciable explosion.

"Greeeeaaatt..." Ryuko's eyebrow twitched settled as wood, bark, dirt and even a little concrete pelted the grass around them.

"Impressive, is it not?" impressed by the magical detonation and pyrotechnics undoubtedly heard across the park, Luxord searched Ryuko's expression for weakness yet found nothing but annoyance, "Perhaps not as impressive as what you're capable of, surely."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah..."

Patience frayed to a few strands, Ryuko interrupted Luxord before she did anything she'd regret, "Can we just play your stupid game already!?"

"Figured the rules out?" stroking his chin, Luxord let loose a chuckle, "Truth be told, Ryuko, the odds are stacked against me. You are quite the formidable adversary. Even tipping the field of battle towards my favor doesn't guarantee victory. But I believe it's more fun when you beat the odds, wouldn't you agree?"

As if waiting for him to say whatever he said, the cards began spinning faster and faster.

"Now," pointing at a card, the Gambler of Fate announced his intentions, ["Prepare yourself!"](#)

Ryuko didn't need his permission to start playing.

Threadcutter arcing through the air, she pointed at a random card, sending it fluttering onto the field.

[] vs. [VII]

The card she'd chosen spun three times, displaying four different versions of the Kanji for 'nine' across the corners in purple letters, before something manifested into reality.

"What the hell?"

It had to be a trick. Something to knock her off-balance. Because this *wasn't* her master. Or maybe, it was Beatrix before the Cloud of Darkness ruined everything. An old memory of her master. Because this half-assed illusion of Beatrix was holding Save the Queen in its right hand as it rushed the muscular monster wielding an oversized hammer-sword. The same right arm Beatrix lost fighting the Cloud of Darkness ten years ago. Caught between saying something and figuring out what the hell was happening, Ryuko's mouth opened and closed as pearlescent rose-white light emanated from the false Beatrix's Keyblade.

Followed by a complicated series of movements she'd tried, and failed, to perfect so many times she'd lost count.

And darting beyond the stunned muscle-bound creature still in the motions of attacking, boots floating above the grass, the illusionary Beatrix swept a hand through her air identically to her master, gently dissipating into motes of light moments after the creature shattered into darkness.

"You win the first hand, Ryuko."

Luxord admitted defeat with faux serenity as the cards surrounding himself and the victorious master reset themselves, "Ask your -"

Instead of considering *what* she wanted to ask, Ryuko blurted out the first thing that came to mind, "Why did Beatrix come flying out of that card!?"

"You saw my card, did you not?" some modest semblance of normalcy returned to Luxord's posture. Now, this was quite the lucky break. He hadn't expected Ryuko to waste her first and perhaps most important question on an errant and unnecessary tangent, "Suffice to say, your cards are different from mine, based not upon random creatures but those whom you hold near to heart. Friends. Family. Acquaintances. They are, to put it simply, manifestations of those whom you've reached out and touched with your heart."

Echoes of cherished memories brought into existence through the chains connecting your heart with others. Or so I've been told."

Ryuko's mouth twitched, "Didn't anyone teach you it's wrong to look through a woman's memories?"

"A lesson to keep in mind, perhaps."

Concealed by shadows, Luxord's grimace remained hidden from prying eyes, "Although I hope that answers your question."

Refusing to acknowledge the embarrassment of wasting a question over something that didn't matter, Ryuko struck another card completely at random, "Shut up and keep playing!"

[] vs. [IX]

While she thoroughly enjoyed watching Satsuki strut out of her card, Muramasa already partially unsheathed, and slice apart Demyx's stupid goon before disappearing into motes of bluish-white light, Ryuko bit her tongue, "This time I'm not wasting my question! Are you working with Demyx!?"

Even if she couldn't see his stupid face, she *knew* her question hit close to home.

"We are colleagues, yes, working towards similar objectives, yet our methods significantly differ," having spoken truthfully to an extent, Luxord focused not on Ryuko, but the pattering sound echoing throughout the barrier. Down two for two and the game had only begun? Perhaps lady luck wasn't quite smiling upon him. And with the rules firmly entrenched upon the field, he couldn't lie to Ryuko. Nor could he refuse to answer without testing his luck on Overdrive. But concealing the truth was different from half-truths, "Privy I ask, but surely you could have deduced our association readily given the information at hand. Why not ask something useful? If our situations were reversed, I would have inquired your name."

"Because I don't *care*."

Bending her neck one way, then the other, bones and muscles shifting with a resounding *crack*, Ryuko elaborated, "I'm sure you have a great name. And a heart-wrenching backstory explaining why you're working with an asshole like Demyx. Blah! Blah! Blah! I've heard it before. And I'll hear it *again* after I beat you at your own game. Besides - " she smirked. Not a normal smirk. But a fang-filled vicious grin, " - I'm not gonna waste another question on something I'll forget in the next five minutes."

"Fair enough."

It was not emotions he lacked the means to understand, let alone possibly comprehend, that unnerved Luxord, "Will you have the courtesy of choosing your next card?"

[] vs. [XII]

She hated losing.

But instead of worrying about whatever weird questions the bastard wrote on a crumpled-up piece of paper in his pocket, Ryuko stared at *what* - or rather, *who* - exploded from her card in a pink burst of musical notes. It was Jakuzure, right down to the annoying smirk that made her want to punch something. Leaning around the cards rotating clockwise in front of her face, she recognized the stupid Symphony Regalia. Not the first version, which was a goddamn tank no matter what Satsuki claimed, but the second one. The one that decimated Nudist Beach's headquarters beneath in Osaka.

It shouldn't have bothered her so much. She was a grown woman. A Keyblade Master. But after spending years looking for Jakuzure, searching high and low throughout the universe for Satsuki's best friend only to come back empty-handed time and time again, guilt grasped her heart like an iron vice and refused to let go.

Loathe as she was to admit it, whatever magic was animating her memories was impressive.

She could *smell* the music.

And facing Jakuzure was another one of those creatures. Cylindrical head, six diagonal slits on the front, a grey jumpsuit and pair of swords. It even had the familiar emblem on both sleeves. It didn't move. It didn't breathe. And then, in a flurry of slashes most people would find fast, it sliced Jakuzure before disappearing into darkness.

Something which hardened the guilt within her heart.

"Luck has chosen me," there were many questions Luxord wished to ask, yet counting ones chocobos before they hatched against a dangerous adversary was incredibly foolish. If he moved too quickly or enquired something too personal to the irascible master, she might prematurely end the game, "Let's even up the deck, Ryuko."

"Oh, for the love of - " eyebrow twitching, Ryuko wished she could bang her forehead against something incredibly dense, "Enough with the stupid puns! Just ask your question and get on with it!"

"Very well, if you insist," pushing aside his distaste, Luxord settled upon an innocuous question, "Answer the following - why have you come to this world?"

"I didn't plan on it, if that's what you're wondering," digging a finger into her ear as rain and thunder slammed against the bastard's impressive barrier, Ryuko grimaced, working the annoying kink out of her shoulder, "I was doing something important, blacked out and woke up here. That's all there is to it. Alright, enough talking! Time to play!"

[] vs. [V]

"The game continues..."

Even as the words passed through his lips, condescension with a hint of undeserved smugness, Luxord did not smile.

Contrary to lesser intellects, the art of gambling did not depend exclusively upon luck. Nerves of unflinching adamantite were necessary. Anything that could be used to minimize any disadvantages was potentially useful. As such, experience served as the only bulwark preventing him from revealing to Ryuko, who appeared uncharacteristically subdued in response to the enigmatic figure emerging from her memories, his own interest. Who were these strange people? They obviously held some significance to Ryuko's heart, yet he couldn't recall data on them. Could they herald from Ryuko's original world, thus making them unfortunate victims of the darkness which permanently shifted the meandering river of fate squarely in Ryuko's favor?

He did not know.

But the peculiarity of their appearance evoked more than glancing curiosity in Luxord's mind. The enormous figure was significantly taller than Lexaeus, clad in white metal with green highlights, pronounced muscular underneath a grey bodysuit, a golden mask exposing neither face nor eyes, golden stars on its chest, a strangely blunt weapon and an unrecognizable symbol on what appeared to be an armored skirt.

To some extent, the figure resembled the Samurai which had recently sworn fealty to young Roxas.

"... discard and draw, Ryuko," undeterred by the prospect of divulging information to someone as dangerous as Ryuko, Luxord's expression hardened into a frown.

[] vs. [X]

"Hmph."

As the echo of Ryuko's master faltered against one of his soldiers, surrendering ephemeral shards of light and darkness to the merciless nothingness from which they'd arisen, Luxord let slip a small grin, "It appears victory is mine."

One didn't require emotions to facilitate the biological reactions associated with nervousness. Clammy skin, beads of sweat trickling down one's cheek, anxiety increasing one's pulse while adrenaline flushed through dilated veins. Lacking heart didn't mean he couldn't appreciate the tension clinging to the atmosphere, courtesy of Ryuko's inhuman determination to acquire what he knew through any means necessary.

"Thus, my question is as follows," complimented by escalating rumbles of thunder, Luxord considered several possible questions. Experience dictated the repercussions of an incorrect question far outweighed the benefits. He knew that first-hand. Yet luck was akin to a window of opportunity, opening and closing in the blink of an eye. To achieve victory against an adversary whose nature greatly stacks the deck in their favor, one must be willing to jump on the chance whenever it arises, even if that means placing it all upon the table, "How old are you?"

If revulsion possessed physical weight, Luxord would have suffocated beneath the monstrous pressure.

"... eh... !?"

It hit Ryuko like one of Mako's punches to the face.

Mouth agape, she tried processing the series of bizarre words passing as the bastard's question only to fail again and again and again. And again.

"How old... am..."

Time slowed to a crawl, seconds taking minutes and hours in her mind, as noises resembling syllables bubbled from the depths of her

throat. But after what could only be referred to as an eternity, her heart eventually rebooting enough to drag everything else across the finish line to cold and harsh reality, Ryuko knuckles audibly *cracked* as she swung Threadcutter towards the son of a bitch, "WHAT SORT OF MESSED-UP QUESTION IS THAT!?"

"It is the question I have chosen to ask."

A flick of his wrist, a swipe of his nervous fingers, and Luxord summoned several cards, focusing on familiar motions while gently chastising the master, "Of course, our cards are only separated by a single point. If you choose to do so, you have a one-in-three chance of turning your loss into a tie. The choice is yours, Ryuko."

Ryuko didn't say the first thing that came to mind.

Her mouth twitched, whether from embarrassment or rage or some horrid combination of the two Ryuko didn't know. But it twitched. And with more than a sharp bite to her tongue and anger coursing through her veins, she forced herself to answer the question, "... I'm twenty-eight, you creepy son of a bitch."

Out of nowhere, thick and nauseating darkness brushed against the back of Ryuko's neck, caressing her heart with the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

"What!?"

Not the only one caught by surprise, Ryuko's eyes widened at the reddish-orange sigil spreading beneath her feet, runes and symbols encircling a grinning caricature of a Bomb. With the light growing brighter and brighter by the second, warm hues and burning magic highlighting the genuine fear etched into her eyes, she barely had time to curse before everything erupted into flames hot enough to drive conscious thought from her heart.

BOOOOOOOM!!!!

Last edited: Jul 15, 2020

Chapter 20.1

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/1/1f/Promise_of_a_Reunion_01_KH_RECOM.png]

Don't Lose Your Heart

Chapter 20 - Devil Trigger

The worlds were connected.

Although not as they once were.

Neither better or worse, or somewhere in-between, merely different.

An extravagant ladder stitch of light and darkness connecting worlds once separated from each other.

To think, once upon an age-old time, she considered one crummy world, full of nothing but normal humans going about their boring lives, the pinnacle of entertainment.

Her soft lips, already quirked into a smile, curled at such childish ignorance and naivety.

Along the road ahead lies something you need.

However - in order to claim it, you must lose something that is dear to you.

["It's funny..."](#)

The full moon hovered in the cloudless skies. A nearly perfect circle of pearlescent alabaster against a purplish-black background interspaced with twinkling stars. Stretching onwards to the distant

horizon, hazy thanks to the humidity clinging to the midnight cold, winding every which way, incessantly weathered roads meandered between sloping knolls, random thickets and the occasional ruins of a time long since forgotten. Crickets and other insects chirped. Fireflies did their little dances, appearing as brief flashes of light before extinguishing themselves. A breeze carrying the familiar scent of salt crested over unsuspecting hills. Every now and then, unzipping their way out of the darkness, a couple of Heartless manifested into the world, beady yellow eyes and twitching antennae taking stock of the situation before vanishing back whence they'd come.

"... I ~should~ be upset about being used like this..."

Sitting upon a hill no different or less ordinary than the other hills scattered about the Mi'ihen Highroads, knees tucked against her chest, pink jacket with matching fox-eared hoodie completing the fashionable ensemble, Nui Harime observed Sora's once-in-a-lifetime interaction with the unnecessarily extravagant and enigmatic Nobody without so much as raising a finger, "... but in this case, I'm more than willing to make an exception."

Oh, she could have helped Sora.

It would be ~so~ easy.

But she was a patient woman.

Which was useful at the moment because, thanks to Ryuko flubbing an easy question, she was almost too angry to think straight.

"I mean, using my cute Life Fibers to avoid detection? Can't say I would've considered something so perverted yet surprisingly useful," her saccharine smile, beamish and friendly yet temporarily strained from Ryuko telling a total stranger her age, concealed inhuman malevolence, something not unnoticed by her stodgy manager, "So, now what? You want me to go down and make him talk? Or kill him? It'd be easy and nobody would even know you were involved..."

Her request wasn't really a question.

Only nobody informed the guy standing like a watchful gargoyle immediately to her right, tanned skin and an unnervingly focused amber eye peering between red bandages wrapped around most of his head at Sora and the Nobody introducing himself.

"No, leave him be," anger, hatred and rage flowed through the callousness and cruelty lurking behind his answer. A lesser man would call him heartless. But DiZ did not care. His duty as a servant of the world precluded mercy or compassion. Until Xehanort's ambitions were torn asunder and scattered to the four winds, he refused to allow such things weigh down his heart, "Let him bask in the cold ignorance of his nonexistence a little longer."

Yet he was the furthest thing from a fool.

One unfamiliar with the creature calling itself Nui Harime would have presumed she'd asked permission.

But that was dangerously incorrect.

The moment she inquired about killing the Nobody, the Life Fiber abomination had already made her decision. She flaunted her desires with worse subtlety than a flock of rampaging chocobos. The otherwise innocuous question spilling from her mendacious lips was nothing more than a cruel taunt. A pretext for probing his jaded heart and worming her way into his memories. If she truly wished to do so, she would have already interceded on Sora's behalf. With or without his permission. A fact not lost upon him. A fact the dangerous creature humming quietly to herself barely an arm's length away - a distance which held no meaning considering she could reach him no matter how far away he ran - reinforced with a smile so vindictively cruel his heart almost skipped a beat.

"In their haste, my apprentices have lowered their guard," robe gently fluttering in the midnight breeze flowing over the Mi'ihen Highroads, the long since dethroned ruler observed the young

wielder with somber resignation, refusing to ponder such horrid things any longer than absolutely necessary, "In their haste to acquire Sora's power, they've left themselves vulnerable. An opening we shall exploit to the absolute fullest."

"You know, I honestly didn't think you were going to go through with this."

Pulling her knees closer until they tickled her chin, Nui halfheartedly watched Sora's unfortunate meeting with an empty puppet, sounding both impressed and modestly disappointed at the same time, "Guess this means I owe you an apology, doesn't it?"

The contours of DiZ's face twisted at such honest approval, bandages and belts highlighting veiled contempt and antipathy, "I beg your pardon?"

"Feigning ignorance will get you nowhere!"

There was so much she could have said. Plenty of questions capable of shattering the armor around DiZ's heart, leaving him sputtering and speechless as a newborn baby. Something like that required no effort. But instead of messing around with the old coot, Nui counted the fireflies dancing above the grass. Soft blue eyes displaying impossible warmth utterly at odds with the terrifying darkness lurking inside her heart swiveled narrowing ever-so-slightly in disappointment when DiZ refused to play along. Huh, some people simply didn't know how to have fun. Ryuko's heart might have rubbed off onto her cute and adorable heart, but she wasn't *stupid*. Or dumb. Or blind. This was a human who wanted her dead almost as much as he dreamt about destroying the Nobodies who tore apart his boring and miserable life.

It would be sad if it wasn't already hilarious.

"Using Sora as bait to lure out those annoying sticks in the mud. Letting Sora walk blindly into whatever nefarious plans they've concocted, all so you can locate down their diabolical headquarters.

Refusing to tell anyone who's anyone you haven't kicked the bucket," a gentle tittering easily mistaken for scornful mockery whispered against the night as Nui stretched her arms overhead before folding them behind her neck, "You must *really* hate Xehanort to risk everything over something as pathetic as revenge."

"This, coming from you?" A derisive snort tore its way out of DiZ's heart, "Don't take me for a fool."

Although he utterly despised the extent in which Even succumbed to darkness, DiZ could find no fault in his former apprentice's significant accomplishments. If not for Even, he would never have learned of the parasites ironically known as Life Fibers before it was too late. It was frightening. As a servant of the world, the parasites were anathema to everything he'd sacrificed. The Heartless were the immediate threat due to their numbers, origins and ability to consume the hearts, but to ignore Life Fibers would be tantamount to surrender. Not only did the thaumavores share memories across generations, rendering most effective methods of destruction impotent, they consumed magic.

He did not know why Life Fibers had yet to invade the worlds *en masse*.

Perhaps they lacked the numbers.

Or they possessed some unknown weakness.

DiZ did not know.

But the strength of a single Life Fiber abomination was sufficient to drive fear into his heart.

For all his command over the darkness in which Xehanort banished him to, he was but an ordinary man, bereft of the same strength flowing through warriors, heroes and those whom possessed the Keyblade. Which brought him to the creature guised as a woman, whose existence squeezed his heart with fear. If she so desired, Nui

Harime could end his life without breaking a sweat. At the drop of a hat or shift of her mercurial whims, Nui might decide he'd outlived his usefulness. There would be nothing he could do to stop her. He was, in some regards, her unwilling puppet. A hostage forced into the undesired role of command, A marionette dancing at her fingers, unable to sever his own strings.

Yet one thing connected him and Nui Harime - burning hatred towards Xehanort and the other fools who'd banished him to the darkness.

And the moment Xehanort paid for his crimes?

"My apprentices stole everything precious to me - my home, my research, countless innocents and my pride," the glass vial inside one of the pouches attached to his robe sat heavily with ramifications. It was something wrong. Something *vile*. It was greenish in color, possessing a consistency of watery syrup one moment and oil the next. Yet as he turned towards Nui, grass crunching underneath his boots, DiZ snorted, "But you? What do you know about revenge? You're merely upset because Even dared to research Life Fibers."

["Don't push your luck."](#)

He never saw her stand up.

"Comparing ~your~ pathetic revenge with my personal feelings?"

Surveillance had broken down *how* fast Nui Harime could move. She was quick. Capable of leaving behind doppelgängers or appearing as if she wasn't moving at all. But watching the creature from the security of his laboratory was different than experiencing her abilities firsthand. To blink and find someone standing in front of you? It wasn't so much instantaneous as unnerving. He'd barely turned around, brow furrowed and heart racing inside his chest, to discover a purple and pink Keyblade pointed at his face, courtesy of the monster perched upon the grass less than a millisecond prior.

"For a human, you're awfully arrogance," having garnered the old coot's attention, Nui twisted her deceptively dainty wrist, dragging Seamstress across the contours of his bandaged face before snapping her Keyblade towards his heart, "So, you lost everything near and dear to heart? Everyone you trusted stabbed you in the back. I wonder whose fault that was."

She was angry.

And a little irritated.

Neither of which had to do with Ryuko shaking off the cobwebs and giving that gambling Nobody a taste of his own medicine.

"So, between you and me, I'd be ~very~ careful about your next words..."

As she expected, if you gave a mouse a cookie, it eventually bit your fingers. Humans were no different. Weak, powerless, easily succumbing to darkness. There were a few particularly notable exceptions scattered about. Humans she couldn't afford messing with. Not unless she wanted to end up dismembered with more than a few gallons of her blood painting the ground in some macabre mockery of renaissance art. But DiZ wasn't Ryuko. He couldn't compare to her breathtakingly beautiful sister. Or even Satsuki. He was the furthest thing from special. Just another pig in human clothing who'd arrived ~far~ too late to the game to make any difference.

Of course, Nui could admit it ~was~ impressive he'd created imperfect tailoring weapons with very few Life Fibers and knowledge less than most middle managers as Revocs.

But there was only so much a woman could take before losing any semblance of self-control.

And hearing a human... an ordinary pig in human clothing with dreams of grandeur... normalize what his pitiful student did with

Ryuko's Life Fibers pretty much carried her bridal style to the precipice of thrusting Seamstress into his gut and gleefully twisting.

"... because they just might be your last!"

The wind rushing through her hair. The nightly chill formed goosebumps on her arms. Insects chirped nearby. And through it all, Nui never stopped smiling, "Now, are you done talking about me, or do you ~really~ want to go down this road?"

A sharp whisper pressed against the world.

Moonlight glimmered off Nui Harime's Keyblade.

Seconds passed, silence beckoning the dethroned king towards oblivion.

Yet despite the threat echoing darkly in the recesses of his soul, spontaneous laughter shattered the nervousness shackling DiZ's heart, "How ironic. Despite your self-aggrandizement concerning humanity's inferior, you possess the same capacity for emotions. The same propensity towards vengeance. The same instinct to defend what's yours no matter the cost."

"Of course," matching DiZ's broken smile with a grin no less dangerous than her normal expression, Nui tilted her head slightly to the right, stuck out her tongue and giggled, "There's only so much taboo a woman can take before she loses all sense of self-control, after all. But that's neither here nor there, is it? Because I have the strangest suspicion you compared me to a pig in human clothing. But that can't be true. There's no way a smart-ass scientist like you would be ~stupid~ enough to say something bound to result in a Keyblade breaking your spine, right?"

"Hmph."

Instead of contemplating such a ridiculous and pointless question, even if the answer might extend his life, DiZ focused on the matter at

hand, "This is neither the time nor the place to discuss such things."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," relaxing her grip, Nui allowed Seamstress to fall away from the geezer's heart before turning aside, one sneaker gently tapping against the dirt and Keyblade held against the small of her back, "I suppose the plan hasn't changed?"

"That is correct."

Arms folded behind his back, DiZ somberly watched the young Keyblade wielder across the Mi'ihen Highroads, thoughts never approaching the horrid scenario of what would happen if Xehanort sank his fingers into such an immature heart, "But my apprentices aren't fools. Infiltrating their base won't be easy, not even for someone as deviously cunning as yourself."

"Oh, you don't need to worry about little old me."

Seamstress dissolved into far too many motes of purple and pink twinkling stars to count as Nui lowered her arm, strutting around DiZ without a care in the world and a mischievous smile gracing her lips, "I can go wherever I want to go, and no one can stop me."

Despite knowing better than to do so, DiZ snorted at such a ridiculous statement, "If you say so."

Following the monster as she walked across the knoll, arms clasped behind her back and grass crunching beneath her white and pink sneakers, he brushed aside the sense of *wrongness* which clung to Nui Harime's existence. He could feel it. The specter of death constantly looming over his jaded heart. Beneath the moonlight, the artificialness describing the truth of the matter stood prominent. Flesh as smooth as porcelain glowed softly on a face absent of scars and marks. Hair which bounced against the wind. Eyes possessing neither warmth nor light. The abomination was anathema to everything he'd sacrificed as a servant of the world to protect from Xehanort's ambitions.

She'd never been human.

And never would be.

Only a fool trusted their eyes instead of their heart.

"But now we come to the crux of the matter," yet hatred was something he and Nui Harime had in common. One would be blind not to notice the truth. Concealed underneath such unnerving affability and gregariousness, masked by a smile straining at the corners, the monstrous abomination born of parasites and darkness utterly despised Even with every fiber of her existence, "Once we arrive upon Xehanort's doorstep, will you follow my directions? Or will you decide my usefulness to your furtive plans has come to an end?"

"Hmmm..."

Stopping dead in her tracks, Nui gently tucked a bang of blonde hair behind her ear, "To be honest, I haven't decided."

Was it more than a little stupid admitting something as obvious as 'tying up loose ends' to someone who understood Life Fibers a little too much for their own good? Nui's ubiquitous smile widened. Maybe. But she always told the truth, even if once in a while, if she felt like having some fun on a rainy day, she kept a few details secret in case of an emergency. She could remember Hououmaru calling her dangerously naïve considering the information and knowledge sewn into her heart and soul would've been enough to significantly derail the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet if it fell into the wrong hands.

Tilting her head back, eyes closed and lips curling into a saccharine smile, Nui hummed softly underneath her breath while her heart fluttered at such pleasant memories.

"You have been awfully rude," the unstated implications clung to her tongue as fireflies danced in front of her eyes, "Not to mention that

~special~ weapon you've been spending so much time working on. And you probably have an emergency plan to tell Ryuko and her friends all about me, don't you?"

She didn't need to hear his answer.

It would be nice, but completely unnecessary. Ryuko already figured out what happened to that Nobody's pathetic puppet. A toy she enhanced, fixed and sent Ryuko's way as a funny little birthday present. After messing around in Thebes with that funny marionette, Sora probably told his friends all about Exdeath. Which meant Satsuki either knew or would soon discover she was still kicking and breathing and would tell every single one of Ryuko's friends. And that, more than anything in the universe, meant it was only a matter of time before things got extremely messy.

A titter escaped her lips.

A soft laugh.

A cheerful memory from the depths of her heart.

"That's why, if it's fine with you, I'm just gonna wait and see what happens," hands folded behind her neck, Nui stared at the full moon, azure eyes mirroring the alabaster blanketing the endless fields, "I ~could~ kill you. But as long as you hold up your end of the bargain, there's really no reason for me to gut you like a fish, is there?"

The intent behind the subtle threat was breathtakingly honest.

Time stretched onwards.

DiZ's eye narrowed.

Nui Harime said nothing to alleviate his suspicions.

And then he started chuckling.

"Hmph, cruel to be kind, is it? And here I believed you creatures lacked compassion."

Turning his back on the cruel monstrosity capable of driving worlds to their knees without so much as breaking a sweat, DiZ observed Sora's decision. As expected, the young Keyblade wielder and the King's allies decided not to continue onwards to Luca. For a moment, perhaps born from Master Ryuko's proclivity towards doing the opposite of whatever someone had in mind, he thought Sora would reject the Nobody's offer, rendering both his plans and Xehanort's moot. Temporarily, at least. But as he watched the boy disappear beyond the horizon, heading towards a destination which might utterly destroy his heart, the former king folded his arms behind his back, frowning not at himself, but what needed to be done.

"But I have no intention of reneging on our arrangement."

DiZ's thoughts raced in endless circles, looping back upon themselves only to scatter against the relentless darkness. Expect the unexpected even if the unexpected wouldn't happen in a million years. Master Braska once told him those peculiar words. It had been a rather tedious day, long before Xehanort arrived outside the castle and Life Fibers were little more than two different words. But now that advice took hold inside his heart. How many Nobodies had Xehanort gathered under his wing? What abilities did they possess? Did they know he was coming? Were they expecting him? So many questions without answers.

"However, I do have a suggestion..."

Choosing his words carefully, DiZ glanced over his shoulder, "... my apprentices undoubtedly anticipate you coming after them. Which is why I believe Nui Harime should not arrive on their doorstep."

"Oh?"

Her interest piqued by the unexpected and rather strange request, Nui's eyes widened before playfully narrowing, "*Comme c'est curieux*. And who should I introduce myself as?"

"Given how much time and effort you've spent searching for my wayward pupil, I think it's only fair you're allowed to choose whichever form you desire," he'd witnessed Nui transform but once. A demonstration of her abilities. She'd become him, perfect in every way down to the parting of his hair and wrinkles on his cheeks. She'd possessed his tone, his tenor and mimicked his mannerisms to such an extent he theorized she could copy aspects of a target's heart, "Although I would prefer someone they wouldn't recognize."

"Aw, you're such a stick in the mud!"

Despite feigning annoyance, exhilaration plucked the corners of Nui's lips into a smile slightly too broad for her face. Go as anyone she wanted with one modest and inconsequential restriction? How could she refuse such a generous offer? Her heart positively thrummed with excitement. Choices... choices... there were so many choices. The possibilities were nearly endless! But what in the world would she wear? Humming underneath her breath, grass crunching as her sneakers floated above the ground, Nui wracked her mind, cycling through countless outfits before settling upon one particularly beautiful dress. The perfect outfit to showcase how much she ~loved~ what Even was doing with Ryuko's Life Fibers.

"But I can work with that."

The wind roared through the Mi'ihen Highroads. Insects vanished. Fireflies stopped dancing in the pale moonlight. And standing across the hill from the scientist, Nui folded her arms over her chest. She stretched her fingers. She closed her eyes, leaned forward and giggled. Right before sweeping her arms outwards, fingers splayed and eyes alight with monstrous darkness, "After all, when it comes to making the perfect first impression..."

Countless shimmering Life Fibers unraveled from Nui's fingers.

Weaving and entwining around one another, crisscrossing and backtracking, twinkling brilliantly and casting crimson shadows, the threads filled in the gaps until nothing of the Grand Couturier could be seen.

Not by DiZ.

Not by Heartless.

Not by Nobodies.

Not by anyone.

SNAP!!!

A sound akin to a rubber band snapping back into place screeched against DiZ's ears.

The Life Fibers surrounding Nui Harime squeezed.

And what emerged moments later, strutting forth with shredded threads flowing into her pale skin, was someone completely different.

"... one must wear their very best."

CLACK!!!

Standing at an appreciably statuesque five inches over six feet, skin paled to near alabaster, eyes dyed maroon and lips possessing a purple shade, Nui flicked a finger through purest white hair. Adorned by a white version of the gaudy black coats worn by the Nobodies, albeit with quite a few modifications and improvements to the stitching, she sighed, an almost sensual release of air, ["Would you not agree?"](#)

Last edited: Aug 12, 2020

Chapter 20.2

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/3/3c/Kill-3-25-matoi-ryuuko-bleeding.jpg/revision/latest?cb=20150413042159>]

Pain.

Anger.

Then more pain.

As fire and flames consumed her, heat burning her skin and driving the air from her lungs, Ryuko remained fully conscious. An explosion wasn't the worse thing imaginable. No, she'd felt worse, fought worse and experienced worse. Losing an arm trying to out-punch the Cloud of Darkness, waking up halfway across the Realm of Darkness with the Heartless looking to finish the job? Yeah, that had sucked some serious ass. Maleficent throwing every type of black magic imaginable? That had really sucked. Throwing everything at Nui Harime only for the crazy bitch to fake her death? Nothing in the universe compared to that embarrassment.

But none of those things made getting slapped across the face by an explosion any less painful.

It still *hurt*.

"Guah... hah... hah... hah..."

A strained grimace pushed its way out of her bloodied lips as the translucent barrier composed of countless hexagonal panels shattered, raining shards of glowing magic which quickly dissipated into incandescent smoke before reaching the ground. One of her knees buckled. But with Threadcutter effectively pressed against her face, Ryuko refused to fall. It shouldn't have worked. Desperation had forced tons of magic through her Keyblade at the last second,

timed exclusively with the Bomb exploding underneath her feet. Yet it had worked. Not well, but enough to reduce the explosion to something manageable.

Glaring at the cheating bastard from behind Threadcutter, blood trickling down her chin, Ryuko snarled, each mouthful of air colder than the bitterest winter's night, "Son of a bitch!"

Everything *hurt*. It hurt to move. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to imagine the satisfaction of how far she was going to shove her Keyblade up his ass and unleash a firestorm unlike anything yet witness throughout the universe. But pain wasn't new or surprising. She expected to receive a few punches now and then. It came with the job. If she didn't want to get bloodied by assholes, she would have already hung up her Keyblade and found another job.

But she didn't.

She couldn't.

And she wouldn't.

Not as long as monsters like Nui existed.

"If you're gonna fucking cheat -"

Coppery liquid filled her mouth, which Ryuko spat out with a contemptuous snort. Someone was talking. It might have been the bastard suddenly too scared to brag about his stupid rules. Or maybe it was her heart. She didn't know. And she didn't care. Smoke rose from her body. Blood covered the left side of her face. Her lungs felt like they were on fire. Yet the idea of wasting energy healing wounds that would've killed pretty much anyone else never crossed Ryuko's mind, "[- I'm done playing around!](#)"

It wasn't a question.

Or an accusation.

It was a *fact*.

And Luxord knew it.

Yet the vigorous proclamation, a promise he knew Ryuko would fight tirelessly to fulfill no matter the cost to herself, was not why his heart skipped a beat.

Her wounds were healing without magic. Not the most surprising fact considering the peculiar threads weaving her existence into something inhuman. A thin veneer of humanity one would be hard-pressed to notice. Yet witnessing such an unholy process with his eyes was vastly different from Vexen's presentations. It was a curious spectacle. One both fascinating and revolting. Much in the same way a sponge absorbed water, Ryuko's blood vanished into her skin, leaving her ash and grime-covered snarl otherwise unblemished. Wounds beyond even the most powerful restoration magics stitched themselves together, rapidly erasing any evidence of injury and the horrible light radiating from the depths of her body.

In but a handful of moments, Ryuko bore no evidence of failing to abide by the stated rules.

"A smart player knows how to adapt his game to suit the house rules."

Daring to provoke a creature on the precipice of contorting existence into a veritable hurricane of death, darkness and destruction wasn't the wisest move, but Luxord could not help but appreciate the caustic irony. Here he was, the lowest ranked member of the organization, pawn to bishops and rooks, witnessing something which gave even Xemnas pause, "But *cheating*? Absurd. Where is your proof?"

"Proof!?"

Ryuko's voice was unnaturally deep, an almost disturbingly dark reflection of her normal self as she dragged her wrist against the

corner of her mouth, spat out some blood, cracked her neck and growled, "Getting blown the fuck up is all the proof I need!"

It began as an obnoxious shimmer on the corners of his vision. Then a gentle twinkle around Ryuko's messy hair. But as Threadcutter spun around her claws before swinging overhead in a parabolic arc trailed by crimson magic, light exploded from her heart. An otherworldly deluge possessing genuine weight and mass. A power so incredibly potent yet frustratingly ephemeral that Luxord could not help but observe the culmination of Ryuko's effort. And that curiosity, misplaced as it might be, allowed him to see what lurked beneath the veneer of humanity.

A darkness so expansive he could not fathom whether it possessed boundaries or continued into infinity illuminated along the edges with light deep enough he couldn't touch lest it permanently disintegrate his fingers. Antitheses contradicting each other yet existing in perpetual balance. And something else. Something enduring upon the periphery of his senses and which eluded even the most questionable hypothesis his strained mind could comprehend.

Within the burning shadows and eclipsed light radiating from the Keyblade Master, an outline of *something* momentarily manifested into existence.

"And if you're gonna cheat, there's no reason for me to keep following your stupid bitch-ass rules!" dragging her tongue against her teeth, Ryuko shifted one foot backwards, kicking up clouds of dirt, twisted her wrists in opposite directions and snapped Threadcutter into a pair of reverse-edged swords, "It's time for a new game! And we're gonna do it Lindblum Style!"

Rain pitter-pattered.

Thunder rumbled.

Crimson twinkled around Threadcutter.

Her toes curled inside her boots.

And faster than a heartbeat, she floated next to Luxord, one blade arcing towards his neck and the other aimed at his heart.

BZZZTTT!!!

"Guh-huh?"

When the Nobody disappeared faster than his presence vanished from her heart, Ryuko stomped her feet into the grass, shifted her center of balance, ground her heels into the dirt and pivoted around, light steaming from Threadcutter's glowing edges like crimson smoke, "The hell - "

A reddish-orange sigil appeared underneath her feet before she finished the question, incomprehensible runes and symbols slowly rotating around the annoying caricature of a Bomb.

"NICE TRY!!!"

Unlike last time, when she'd gotten caught with her pants around her ankles, she wasn't stupid enough to stand around and *watch* it happen. Faster than the magic powering the trap reached the epicenter, triggering the underlying enchantments, Ryuko leapt sideways, light trailing from her hair just before the deafening *boom* slammed against her ears, "BUT IT AIN'T GONNA WORK AGAIN!!!"

As much as she would have loved to rub the point into the son of a bitch's skull alongside more than a couple punches, Ryuko realized she might have spoken too soon. With scorching flames caressing the back of her neck like one of Mako's embarrassing yet welcome public hugs in the middle of Lindblum, she landed one foot after the other, skidding several meters along the grass only for *another* trap to appear as soon as she stopped moving. And then another. And another. And another. And another, transforming the landscape into something that could only be called a hellscape of smoke, fire and dirt.

"SO WHAT'S IT GONNA TAKE - " Ryuko didn't know where she was going, or which direction she was running, but darting back and forth with only the bastard's darkness as a beacon through the flames accompanying every explosion, she gnashed her fangs, felt something inside her heart *snap* and screamed, " - FOR YOU TO TAKE THE HINT!?"

And somewhere, far in the distance, on the streets and neighborhoods surrounding Gross Park, every electrical appliance suddenly overloaded before violently exploding.

"RAAAAGGGGGHHHH!!!"

Ryuko's anger penetrated the storm as she emerged from an ill-timed explosion, little worse for wear yet pissed off beyond any conceivable record, "THAT DOES IT!!!"

Flowing gracefully upon currents of magic and light, she pushed off the ground without a second thought.

Blood rushed to her head. Gravity pulled her down. Her boots stomping against cards which, almost as quickly as she left, transformed into spikes of pure darkness. But kept aloft by anger, ruby light radiating from her tousled hair. Ryuko sprinted up the inside of Luxord's stupid barrier. And the moment gravity fully inverted itself, leaving her upside-down on top of the barrier, she glanced downwards and aimed at the only source of darkness in range, **"TSUBAMEGAESHI!!!"**

Light poured forth, transforming shades of gray into a kaleidoscope of colors.

The muffled wind howled against her ears.

And with nothing more than the faintest inkling where the bastard was hiding outside his noxious darkness, she crossed Threadcutter's mismatched blades in front of her face, crimson shimmering along their edges like water dripping from a window, before swinging the

futuristic-looking Keyblades far more times than she bothered counting, unleashing a multitude of crescent-shaped blades of wind the same shade of bright red as her hair.

BZZZTTT!!!

Yet she *missed*.

One of Threadcutter's blades skewered the dirt. Followed by the other.

"Ugh... goddamn it!"

Landing in a silent crouch amidst the ongoing devastation and destruction upon a piece of overturned earth, Ryuko took a second to catch her breath before grabbing both halves of her Keyblade, squeezed their hilt-less handles and grumbled in the back of her throat, bones and muscles cracking as she stood up, "He's one of *those* assholes."

Temporal magic.

She *hated* temporal magic.

Something about this wasn't right. She didn't know what it was, but it felt like she was missing something. Something important. Her lips twisted into a snarl. Her eyes snapped back and forth, searching for the bastard as rain poured strangely fast overhead. And when she found him lurking halfway across the battlefield behind a playground built for a kid almost half Gamagori's size, she didn't hesitate to draw her arms apart before crashing them together, smashing Threadcutter back to a single Keyblade just in time to spin around, pinpoint the asshole's location down the millimeter and launch it straight at Luxord.

"GOT YA!!!"

Her Keyblade flew true.

Only for a tornado of playing cards to block Threadcutter.

Which was what she'd wanted all along.

At the exact moment Threadcutter reached Luxord, Ryuko dissolved into crimson light. She flowed through the gap between space and time, stepping foot into the perpetual darkness between worlds. An overwhelming darkness that held no sway over her heart. Nor compared to the Cloud of Darkness. As her Keyblade bounced off the maelstrom of cards, Ryuko's fingers shattered the boundary surrounding Monstropolis. They furiously latched around ruby-gold metal before it flew out of reach. And with a feat of acrobatics that would've made Satsuki raise an eyebrow, she pivoted midair, one leg trailing behind the other and hair fluttering around her face, and smashed Threadcutter against the Nobody seemingly about to wet himself.

BZZZTTT!!!

For the third time, Luxord escaped unscathed.

Well, *almost* unscathed.

"Oh, so close," blood dribbling from Threadcutter onto the ground next to her foot, mixing with the rain pattering through the dissolving barrier, "But it looks like I'm getting the hang of your little trick."

"Brav... ugh... o, Ryuko."

Luxord could find no fault in Ryuko's arrogance.

If circumstances were different, he would've lorded his superiority without a moment's hesitation.

"I suppose I knew our game wouldn't end any other way," smiling weakly, Luxord afforded Ryuko a sincere chuckle as blood flowed between his fingers despite his efforts at staunching the wound scarring his shoulder, "You truly were born for these sorts of games."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

Threadcutter resting on her shoulder and the taste of blood lingering along the contours of her mouth, Ryuko stomped with obvious annoyance towards the Nobody. None of it was new. She'd heard it all before. I'm sorry for trying to destroy a world. Beneath the surface, we're not so different. And her favorite, darkness is the true source of everything, everyone and the heart. Then there was the convoluted nonsense Nui spewed, which only served to give her a migraine as she stopped just short of Luxord, close enough to take him out once and for all if he did anything stupid yet far enough to dodge if he did anything extremely stupid.

"Now hold still before I change my mind," with a snort, she dragged Threadcutter off her shoulder, emerald light flowing between its teeth like water. Magic as soothing as a summer morning caressed the stormy ambience, momentarily making her feel somewhat better as she twisted her wrist ninety degrees counterclockwise and grumbled in a tone suggesting she'd rather be doing anything than what she was about to do, **"HEAL!"**

"A random act of mercy?"

He did not understand why Ryuko deigned to reverse her accomplishment, nevertheless, Luxord allowed the master to heal the wound, "How uncharacteristically generous."

"Oh, get over yourself!"

Ryuko clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, refusing to say the first thing that came to mind. It was perfect. But Mako didn't like her saying something that 'makes empty chairs bleed' in pleasant company. Or any company. Or around anyone. Or by herself when nobody was home. So, instead of dealing with Mako when she finally got home to Lindblum and took a shower, Ryuko spat out the truth, "I didn't help you out of the kindness of my heart! I did it because Steiner would tear my ass a new one if your blood got over the castle floors!"

"Your prisoner, am I?"

Blood coated Luxord's fingers, lingering evidence of the horrid wound which scarred his shoulder but moments ago, "While I do appreciate your generous offer, Ryuko, one you make in good faith, I must unfortunately reject an extended stay in the charitable accommodations of the Alexandrian Dungeons."

"Ugh, you're *really* gonna make me kick your ass again!?"

Eyebrow twitching, Ryuko aimed Threadcutter between the bastard's eyes, "I have better things to do than play games with you!"

"I beg to differ."

He gave no warning apart from those words. In a flicker of darkness and brush of shadows, Luxord vanished, reappearing moments later far beyond the master's range, "It may sound cliché, Ryuko, but if our roles were somehow reversed, would you not do the same for your sister? Your friends? Or friends? Or even your master? Or would you callously throw your bonds to the wayside, rejecting everything to save yourself?"

"That's bull -"

Ryuko wanted nothing more than to throw those words back in Luxord's face.

But an entire Gold Saucer's worth of cards bursting out of the ground ruined her plans, "Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!"

It was way more annoying than disturbing a beehive. The cards weren't razor-sharp and didn't explode, but there were so freaking many of them. And they weren't stopping. Unable to see the asshole probably having the time of his life or hear whatever nonsensical philosophical bullshit he was using to justify turning his face inside-out, Ryuko crossed Threadcutter in front of her face and skipped Plan A - waiting until the freak ran out of playing cards - straight for

Plan B. Claws flickering into motion, she spun Threadcutter faster and faster until the Keyblade blurred into a mixture of colors impossible to describe.

Light and darkness clashed, card after card hitting her Keyblade only to burst into nothingness.

And while Luxord was distracted, autumnal light danced within her other hand. Midnight black fabric disintegrated until her claws stood exposed to the rain. Monstrous flesh received second-degree burns as unstable magic gathered to a point no larger than a standard marble warbled and shimmered. But pushing through the pain, Ryuko cocked her arm backwards and memorized the expression upon the cheating Nobody's face, **"FLARE PUNCH!!!"**

BZZZTTT!!!

White-hot flames consumed everything in a deluge of fire and death as she aimed not at Luxord, but where she *knew* he was going to be.

"Heh," shoulders gently rising and falling, acidic smoke rising from her trembling knuckles into the rain as flesh disintegrated under the intense heat reappeared, Ryuko smirked, "The same trick won't work on me twice, dumbass."

A familiar tingle of magic and darkness brushed against her heart.

And just like that, Ryuko found herself backpedaling, teeth gnashed as she tried not tripping over her own feet.

"Damn it!" arms failing, Ryuko felt her foot hit something - a rock or a piece of the picnic table she'd shattered earlier - and suddenly found herself falling. But recovering her balance by driving Threadcutter into the ground, twisting her wrist and landing on her feet, she glanced over her shoulder, cursed and promptly vaulted sideways as more cards exploded out of nowhere, "Oh, come on! There's no way you can be THAT loyal to anyone!"

"All men might be loyal, but the objects of their allegiance are at best approximate."

One card, neither important compared to those whom defied fate with every breath nor unique, shot out of Luxord's sleeve, "You would be wise to remember such advice."

"Ugh, shut *up* ALREADY!!!"

Ryuko wished more than anything she could blow up the Nobody with nothing more than her mind. But that wasn't going to happen. Not soon, at least, or until she asked Merlin for advice. And the wizard wasn't too keen on teaching her black magic. Not after that unfortunate incident involving a wheelbarrow, several enchanted brooms and Horace Horsecollar's entire percussion set. Which wasn't her damn fault! How the hell would she have known using too much magic would lead to something *that* horrible? Putting the mishap firmly out of mind, she ducked beneath several cards, leaned around some more, flipped forward and slammed Threadcutter against the ground, "You're giving me a headache!"

A powerful shockwave rippled across the park.

Originating at her Keyblade, pure energy tore newfound canyons through the already decimated landscape.

"So, unless you're gonna give up, skip the monologue and forget the speeches," knuckles cracking from the orichalcum-like grip she had upon Threadcutter, Ryuko's nauseating green skin highlighted the annoyance dancing in her heart as hundreds of cards tainted by darkness rained downwards, "Because I'm about to kick your ass six ways to Sunday!"

"Very well..."

Several distinctively unaverage cards flickered between Luxord's trembling fingers as the weight of Ryuko's proclamation reverberated through reality, "I suppose congratulations are in order. You're the

first to see through my trick. So, for that, you have my appreciations. But let us see how well you fare when confronted by a captive audience!"

Ryuko's brow furrowed.

"Nice try," dislodging the stupidity before it settled into her heart, she shook her head and spat, "But I'm not fallin' for - "

"CLEAR THE AREA!!! THIS IS A CODE 1102!! REPEAT! THIS IS A CODE 1102!"

A floodlight illuminated the park, followed by another and another and another, as a voice sounding like someone was trying to talk through a mouthful of rocks repeated himself.

"CODE 1102! REPEAT! THIS IS A CODE 1102!"

"Geez, now I'm *really* getting a headache," she didn't know what the help was going on. But with one claw wedged in her ear, Ryuko glanced over her shoulder at the dozen helicopters hovering overhead. As she watched, eyebrows raised and Threadcutter falling to the wayside, countless monsters of all shapes and sizes rappelled down ropes, each of them wearing identical yellow hazmat suits. Somewhere beyond the trees, far enough away that she couldn't tell *how* far thanks to the rain and wind, reinforced trucks equipped with state-of-the-art anti-human safeguards barreled down bicycle paths, crashed through playgrounds and decimated everything standing between themselves and whatever they were after.

Probably her.

Or Demyx.

"CODE 1102! REPEAT! THIS IS A CODE 1102!"

"Well, you heard the man," as the monster repeated themselves hoarse, Ryuko rolled her eye and turned back towards Luxord,

"Guess it's time I wrapped things up before - "

Only he was gone.

"God... *damn it*," annoyance clinging to her tongue like yesterday's reheated rice, Ryuko bit the inside of her mouth, eyebrow twitching at the fading remnants of darkness where the asshole had been standing moments ago, "Who the hell are these guys?"

CLICK!!!

CLICK!!!

CLICK!!!

CLICK!!!

CLICK!!!

Her eyebrow twitched again. Followed by her cheek spasming alongside a guttural whimper. At least a hundred monsters surrounded her, each pointing a strange and weird weapon at her face. Some of them were barking orders. A few others held bizarre instruments that beeped and whined. And thoroughly unimpressed by the firepower, Ryuko sighed, blowing a strand of hair away from her face, "I knew I should've slept in this morning."

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Chapter 20.3

For a place befitting those lacking meaning and existence, the castle was notoriously quiet.

A real snooze fest.

You could walk from one end to the other without meeting a handful of Nobodies.

But not today.

"Uuuuh... huuuuh..."

The Flurry of Dancing Flames, an admittedly amazing nickname he'd chosen after being badgered by Saïx - couldn't hear himself think. That didn't mean he was deaf. Or blind. Though he wished he could forget everything. Half-confused, half-bewildered but mostly befuddled, Axel stepped out of the corridor of darkness into something best described as a cacophony of bureaucratic failure. For common sense, the cornerstone of what allowed Nobodies like him to function without hearts, failed in the wake of the nonsense stretching before himself and Roxas. Ninjas and Dancers. Sorcerers and Reapers and Mimes. There were even lesser Nobodies sliding along the walls and floors, alluding to the underlying mystery behind why *thousands* of Nobodies were mingling in the hallway right outside the kitchen.

"Hey!"

Grabbing the first Nobody he could, which just so happened to be an Assassin, Axel pierced the crowd with an exasperated glare, "You mind telling me what's going on? Hold on, that doesn't make sense. You serious? But that's - fine, yeah, you can go."

Nothing about what the Nobody said made sense.

How could they *still* be waiting for next week's assignments?

Scratching his temple, Axel wondered if they'd stumbled into an alternate universe where Saïx wasn't unnervingly efficient at handing out assignments. Was the guy dead? That pretty much was the only logical explanation. Ryuko had someone tracked down Xemnas, invaded the castle with her friends and Saïx sacrificed himself to buy time for the rest of them to escape. Only the castle was intact, he couldn't hear any explosions and last time he checked, Ryuko didn't know the first thing about subtlety. Which eliminated the Keyblade Master sneaking up behind them. Which left the question that started everything - what the hell was going on?

"Well, only one way to find out."

Axel took fifteen steps, counted down to the last, before the answer smacked him across the face.

"Alright. Next. Uh... let's see... your group goes to Halloween Town... no, wait, scratch that, Traverse Town."

In the middle of the relentless horde, expression grim and shoulders burdened with responsibility he didn't want yet had no choice but to accept, Xigbar raised the clipboard closer to his eye, "Wait... what? I'm sorry, just - you went there last week? Aren't you group 55? 58? Shit, I can't read his stupid..."

Axel knew he should have said something.

Perhaps offer some advice.

Or land a helpful hand.

But instead of being the bigger man, he chose none of the above. And for a very good - or maybe, vindictive was the better word - reason. He remembered the last time Saïx sought someone to take over assignment duty for an afternoon. Three hours, give or take an eternity. Long enough for him to eat lunch, rest his eyes and figure

out their next move. It would have been fine if Xigbar hadn't convinced Saïx he'd volunteered for the job. Which had been utter bullshit. But, of course, since they were best friends, when Saïx came to him, asking if he'd take over his duties for a couple of hours, he had no choice but to begrudgingly accept the responsibility of ordering *thousands* of Nobodies around, nobody happy and everyone upset.

"Uuuuuhhh... hhaaaaaahhh..."

With the memories of that horrible afternoon memorized for the next century or two, the self-proclaimed Flurry of Dancing Flames stretched his shoulders. Humming a nondescript tune, he worked out the kink in the back of his neck. Pressing both hands against the small of his back and leaned forward, Axel stretched his right arm across his body before casually switching to his left. And only after he'd finished limbering his muscles, but not before fixing his gloves and checking his zipper, did he return to the matter at hand.

"Well - " half-smirking at Xigbar's well-deserved frustration, he tucked one hand into his pocket, " - better go help the poor bastard before he shoots someone."

"Alright, alright, keep it down," at wit's end, Xigbar flipped the clipboard sideways, hoping a new approach would help decipher Saïx's chicken scratch, "Let me just double-check..."

"How's it hanging, Xigbar?"

Saluting his so-called superior in the most roundabout manner possible, Axel shoved himself between two Gladiators, "Gotta say, never thought I'd see you do Saix's job. Should I be worried? I mean - You? A work ethic? Who are you and what have you done with the real Xigbar?"

Irritated to the point of frustration, Xigbar resisted the urge to smash the clipboard against Axel's face, which would make him feel better

but create more work, "You mind explaining *where* the hell you and Roxas scurried off to?"

"Sorry, no can do," sauntering up to the exhausted sharpshooter, Axel whistled at the thick pad of papers barely attached to the clipboard, "Where we've been is classified info."

BANG!!!

An arrow shattered against the ceiling before Axel could so much as chuckle at his joke.

"Listen up!" hefting the arrowgun onto his shoulder with a noticeable *clank*, clipboard pinched between his fingers and amber eye sweeping the crowd which had grown incessantly annoying over the last twenty minutes, Xigbar snarled, "I'm taking a thirty-minute break! By the time I count to five, you better be gone or so help me, you'll be demoted to Dusks so fast even Lord Xemnas won't be able to fix you. One... Two..."

It was a stampede before he reached three.

And the most beautiful memory in the sharpshooter's recent memory.

"Ugh," finally alone after what felt like an unending eternity, Xigbar tilted his head backwards, groaning from the pit of his stomach, "I need a vacation."

He never was someone who preferred the mantle of responsibility. Not that he couldn't handle the pressure. As if! After countless centuries watching the future unfold, one tedious event after another, he preferred sitting back and letting others do the dirty work. Those kids, not quite masters yet possessing a certain ingenuity he couldn't help but to find slightly impressive, had been the exception. A self-replicating virus in the program. An imposter granted a Book of Prophecies by someone determined to ruin everything. Children searching for a loophole in the rules, hoping to escape their destinies through a reckless plot involving alternate worldlines he'd barely

dissuaded. A certain lady of magic hopping backwards in time to reverse her defeat Sora's hands.

Then there were the problems of his own making.

Ardyn.

Garland.

Aera.

"This wasn't exactly my choice of a pleasant afternoon."

Punting the ancient memories and depressing guilt to the furthest recesses of his mind, where they wouldn't bother him until the Second Keyblade War commenced and his departed friends finally returned, Xigbar flipped through page after page after page, each scribbled line worsening his irritation. He never thought he'd say it, but after two hours of subbing in for Saïx, dealing with hundreds of Nobodies seeking guidance for the upcoming week, Xigbar found facing down Ryuko instead of another Dancer who *insisted* he gave assigned it the wrong mission extraordinarily tempting.

That left a taste in his mouth.

"So, laugh it up," thumb pressing on the corners as a bloodshot eye stared at chicken scratch with arrows leading to scribbles barely resembling language, Xigbar's tone considerably darkened, "Go ahead. I suppose I deserve it. But say one word to Larxene and no amount of magic will fix what I'll do to you."

Awkwardness gripped the sharpshooter when he remembered, albeit belatedly, Axel hadn't returned from his unsanctioned vacation alone.

"Oh, didn't see you there, Roxas," hoping Roxas didn't pick up on the underlying threat behind the promise, Xigbar pinched the bridge of his nose. One day he'd figure out why Roxas looked like Ventus. There had to be a perfectly logical reason Sora's Nobody didn't look

anything like the kid. But for the time being, it was a relief knowing Roxas was normal. Nothing like Vexen's pet project. He'd take a quiet kid over something that had the unnerving ability to pop in and out of reality whenever he least expected it, "Enjoy your little adventure?"

"What happened?"

Yet it was Axel who decided to broach the subject, "*Where is Saix?*"

"Talking with Lord Xemnas and Vexen about something important. Asked me to take over until he got back," Xigbar trailed off as he noticed the lion-like plushie dangling from Roxas's hand. Curiosity begetting further investigation, he slowly panned towards Axel, who feigned ignorance about the matter. And without an answer to the question, decided it was in his best interests to simply move on, "Not that I could refuse a direct order. Not without getting demoted back to Dusk for the next thousand years. Still, listening to complaining Nobodies is way better than what happened to Luxord and Demyx."

The comment, spoken as if Xigbar was discussing tomorrow's weather, caught Axel by surprise, "Don't tell me they've kicked the bucket."

"Nah, they're fine," rolling his remaining eye, the actual man-behind-the-man brushed aside the collective worry smashing against his face like a ton of bricks. Did he care? Not in the slightest. And if that sounded mean, well, too bad. Long before the old coot regained some of his memories, excised his heart and turned him into an unfeeling Nobody scraping along on memories and nostalgia, he'd already decided to stop caring. Empathy and compassion didn't matter in the grand scheme of things. Some might call that coping. Others would say he was a sociopathic bastard meandering along the road to life without stopping to considering the consequences. Maybe they were both right. And maybe they were both wrong.

But when everything is a farce, nothing in life matters.

Nothing anybody did mattered since everything that was destined to happen was going to happen whether they liked it or not.

"Just stumbled across an old acquaintance," accentuating the point with a wave of the clipboard and a nonchalant shrug, Xigbar pretended to read Saïx's chicken scratch before slowly adding under his breath, "Managed to escape with nothing more than cuts and bruises, all things considering..."

"Damn it," a hiss whistled between Axel's teeth, "Talk about some seriously bad luck to run into *her*."

Roxas's expression betrayed confusion. He was the second-newest member of the Organization, which meant there was still a lot of things he didn't know. Like why he had a Keyblade or why he couldn't remember anything or why Saïx didn't let him leave the castle by himself. Or why Xion couldn't leave at all, not even after she demonstrated she was strong enough to fight him to a draw, "Who are you talking about?"

"Well, this sure is awkward..."

Letting out a sound somewhere between a sigh and a huff, Xigbar scratched the back of his neck, "... we were planning on telling you eventually. You know, after you finished settling in, recovered some of your memories, etcetera. Or, to be specific, *Axel* here was supposed to help you learn the ropes," with nonchalance afforded to a man of his stature, Xigbar all but blamed Axel for Roxas being clueless about someone Xemnas didn't want him and Vexen's puppet knowing until everything was ready. But boy, this was going to come back and bite him, "... right, anyway, long story short, kiddo, Heartless ain't the only monsters lurking in the shadows."

Oh, *now* Axel felt the need to add his two cents to the conversation.

But since he was already on a roll, Xigbar ignored the Nobody's loud cough.

"I'm not talkin' about somebody whose heart is full of darkness. Or a random villain spouting cliché after cliché to a stereotypical hero determined to save the princess and his world from the forces of evil. Nope. These are *actual* monsters," it took serious effort to sound blasé about something so personal. But pretending to have no skin in the game was something he'd practiced for decades. Centuries, even. So, acting normal while gagging on every word like they were cursed was almost second nature to him, "Oh, they might look like us. And talk like us. Hell, they might even act really friendly. But don't let that fool you. These things ain't humans or nobodies or anything natural."

Roxas stammered at how *serious* Xigbar, who normally lazed around the castle almost as much as Demyx, sounded, "Really?"

"Why do you think Lord Xemnas won't let you leave the castle unsupervised?" Xigbar made an effort, seriously too, at keeping a straight face despite meaning every word, "If we sent you out on missions by yourself, these monsters would probably find you before you can shout 'Light' at the top of your lungs. And that would suck. Because we kinda need you and the poppet to free hearts with your fancy Keyblades."

As Xigbar finished weaving a story of half-truths and personal anecdotes to someone who missed the deeper meaning, Axel folded his arms, cheek pinched tightly between his teeth.

Yet Roxas wasn't quite finished asking awkward questions, "How many of these monsters are there?"

And there it was - the question Xigbar *really* didn't want to answer. Not that he couldn't come up with an effortless lie capable of ending the conversation. Or convincing Roxas of an underlying truth. But because the slightest slip of his tongue might cause the kid to spill everything to Xion. And Vexen's poppet figuring out the truth and potentially *snapping* would likely cause quite a bit of trouble and commotion, "Who knows. I certainly don't. And as much as I would like to know, I rather like breathing, if you catch my drift."

The long since forgotten master turned nobody felt the slightest semblance of panic in the corners of his weary mind. Not the emotion but memories of the emotion. Specifically, one more than ten years ago. Before that fateful day, he honestly couldn't recall the last time anything, or anyone, frightened him. And pretending to be cowed into obedience by the old coot's amusing threats didn't count. Then Ryuko barged into the picture out of goddamn nowhere like a bat out of hell, scaring the crap out of him, demonstrating she wasn't exactly human or Heartless or anything he could remember stretching way back into the past and permanently scaring his beautiful face with her Scissor Blade.

"Now, if you don't mind, I'm taking a well-deserved break," the jagged scar concealed beneath the eyepatch covering half of Xigbar's face momentarily twitched as unwanted memories from days he'd rather forget bubbled to the forefront of his thoughts. Ryuko Matoi. It was impossible to truly grasp how much he *loathed* her. She was a monster. A being composed of something that shouldn't exist. Yet Ryuko had been the one who finally ended Ardyn's suffering. And she, not himself or his master or his friends, destroyed the Void, securing the realms from a threat far worse than anything Xehanort or Xemnas or Ansem could pose.

He wasn't vindictive enough to not give her credit where credit was due.

That didn't mean, if granted the chance, he wouldn't shoot Ryuko over and over again until her regeneration gave up.

"Oh, right, nearly slipped my mind."

It was embarrassing he'd almost forgotten something so important, especially after Saix beat the select choice of words into his skull. Already halfway into the darkness leading back to the Grey Area, one foot swallowed by writhing shadows, Xigbar glanced over his shoulder at Axel, "Saix told me to pass along the follow message. He wants you to meet him in the library. Something about a mission. Top

priority. Don't know any of the details but it sounded awfully important... so, if I were you, I'd head on over right away."

"Hmm..."

A soft hiss whistled between Axel's teeth as Xigbar vanished, leaving him and Roxas alone, "A mission, huh?"

Silence answered his question, not that he expected anything different. But even so, leaning against the wall with his arms folded and eyes staring blindly at the floor, Axel knew what his friend wanted. Or something along the lines. Saïx wouldn't summon him to the library to give out details about spying on one of Ryuko's friends or searching for lingering evidence of her world. It had to be something else. Something important. Something they couldn't afford anyone, particularly Xehanort's Nobody, discovering. But what, was the question that lingered on Axel's mind.

Wait.

Was it possible?

Could Saïx have finally discovered what happened to -

"Hey, Axel?"

Roxas's voice shattered his concentration, forcefully dragging him back to reality, "Yeah?"

"That strange stuff Xigbar said," the Keyblade-wielding Nobody chewed on the question that seemed equal parts ridiculous and important, "Was he - "

"... telling the truth?"

Axel sighed, which was pretty much the only answer he could give Roxas that wasn't bullshit. Breaking the news about Ryuko Matoi and her soiree of friends wasn't exactly pleasant conversation. Or easy. Hey, Roxas, there's this woman with a Keyblade who could

give Xemnas a run for his money while her friends dealt with the Organization. Oh, and did I mention she looks like Xion because Vexen somehow managed to clone her? Oh, and she possesses bullshit regeneration? He didn't need Xemnas ordering him to keep Roxas and Xion in the dark to know saying anything would be a terrible idea. Not that he didn't trust Roxas to handle the news. Roxas wasn't the problem.

It was Xion.

On the surface, she seemed alright. She didn't display any of the instabilities or other issues Vexen warned him to look out for. Not to mention Xion wasn't anything like Ryuko. But if she discovered the truth about herself... about Life Fibers... about pretty much everything, Axel didn't know how she'd handle it.

The memories of Vexen's 'projects' prior to the Replica Program didn't exactly fill his heart with hope.

Maybe it was only a matter of time before he'd need to put down Xion before she become something worse.

Axel didn't know why something he'd known for weeks made him feel so miserable.

"Well, to be honest, I never fought one of them myself," pushing off the wall, he casually floated detached ignorance while hiding his true thoughts, "But you know that tacky tourist trap outside Twilight Town? The enormous scar? Well, what do you think made it?"

"Wow..."

"Yeah, that does sound pretty scary. Lucky for you, your old pal Axel's stronger than any monster. Got that memorized?" Axel smirked. That had been a joke. An attempt at lightening the mood. But when Roxas failed to smile, he rustled the kid's messy hair, finally earning something other than blank confusion, "Come on,

Roxas, don't tell me you actually believed that stupid nonsense about monsters? Xigbar was joking."

"It was... a joke?" pushing away Axel's arm, Roxas blinked, his mouth pursing as the rusty cogs inside his mind began moving, "... I don't get it."

"Man, we really need to find you a sense of humor," shaking his head and sighing, again, for the hundredth time when it came to Roxas knowing absolutely nothing about interacting with people, Axel said the first somewhat reasonable lie that came to mind, "Well, if I had to guess, Demyx stumbled across a rather annoying Heartless. And if I know Saix as well as I do, he sent Luxord to help the poor guy, which made things worse."

"Hmm..."

"Hmm? What do you mean by 'hmm?' What, you don't believe me?" baffled by Roxas's disbelief, Axel grumbled, "I'm being one hundred percent honest! But if you don't believe I'm capable of doing something so amazing with both hands tied behind my back, I suppose I'll just have to spoil your big surprise..."

"What - hey, come on, Axel!"

"Kidding! Kidding! Geez, you *really* need a sense of humor," one hand on his waist, Axel pivoted sharply, vanishing into darkness while waving over his shoulder, "Well, I'd better see what Saix wants me to do. Cya around, Roxas."

Roxas's retort died on the tip of his tongue before he managed to so much as say one word.

Something about what Axel said didn't make sense.

"It's probably nothing," staring into the Moomba's button blue eyes promising to protect his deepest secrets, Roxas sighed, "Just my imagination."

DAY 22

RYUKO'S FIRST CONFRONTATION WITH ORGANIZATION XIII

SORA ENCOUNTERS MARLUXIA ON THE MI'IHEN HIGHROADS

NUI HARIME AND DIZ OBSERVE SORA, DONALD AND GOOFY

ROXAS GIVES XION THE MOOMBA PLUSHIE

XION NAMES HER NEW MOOMBA PLUSHIE 'BOCO'

...

...

...

...

...

MAKO MANKANSHOKU GETS LOST IN HOLLOW BASTION

Last edited: Jul 24, 2020

Re:Mind [Monstres Redux]

Re:Mind [Monstres Redux]

"Ugh, now isn't *this* typical!"

"Let it go, Mike..."

"As a taxpaying citizen, I have every right to complain!"

"Here we go..."

The day had started as an average, run-of-the-mill November morning. A cold breeze. A few clouds in the sky. The sun gently rising over the rooftops, melting the layer of translucent frost clinging to the foliage. He'd even forgotten about Sully's detour to Monstropolis General until the guy brought it up again, as if reminding him about last night's adventure would make him feel better. Not that he was complaining about his best friend doing a good deed. He'd been in the Dragon Scouts and earned quite a few ghoulish badges. So, he understood why Sully went out of his way to carry an injured monster halfway across town, while it was raining, even with the distinct possibility she was a criminal looming over their heads. But all in all, it had been a fairly typical morning.

Clock into work, scare some kids, humble brag to Jeff about how close Sully was to breaking the all-time scare record, don't make eye contact with Roz, clock out and make reservations for two at Harryhausen's before polishing off the last slice of rancid cheese pizza in the fridge.

"A small chance of scattered thunderstorms in the evening?" stomping through puddle after puddle conspicuously planted in the middle of the sidewalk, rain falling like sheets around them, Mike Wazowski mimicked squeezing something between his claws, "If I ever get my hands on that weatherman, I'll wring his scrawny necks!"

"I think you're overreacting."

"Me? Overreacting?" Mike stared at Sully like the guy recently grew a third head, "This, coming from you, who thought a dodecapus was some horrible monster trying to strangle the life from him?" if the big guy wasn't covered in blue and purple fur, Mike knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, there would be an embarrassed blush stretched across his best friend's visage. But as much as Sully tried repressing the memory, he could never forget such an amazing sequence of events. A beautiful August afternoon at the beach. A soft breeze blowing off the tranquil and calm ocean. Not a cloud floating in the sky. A perfect and unbelievable day.

Only for Sully to come running out of the surf, an otherwise harmless dodecapus wrapped around his face.

It had been, without a single doubt, the funniest thing he'd seen in years.

"As for me, I'm not built for water," growling in the back of his throat when the light changed a little too quickly to be anything other than someone trying to ruin his day, leaving him and Sully standing on the corner in the cold and pouring rain, Mike slapped his stomach, "I'm anti-buoyant! Every time I go swimming, I have to swallow a balloon just so I don't sink!"

"Now you're overreacting."

Sully, attempting to add some levity to the dreariness, shook the enormous umbrella hoisted over his head. An umbrella, simply due to its size, protected not only himself, but several other monsters - Mike included - waiting for the crosswalk to change from red to green, "Besides, it's not all bad. Celia was kind enough to let us take this umbrella from the lost and found."

"Do you always have to look on the bright side?"

Mike wanted to be mad. He *desired* being unreasonable angry at the irritating situation unfolding around them. This was a terrible predicament! The latest misfortune in the ongoing battle between two immature deities about who could screw up his life more! But for some bizarre and inexplicable reason, he couldn't gather the inner fire to sustain such monstrous fury. Maybe he was exhausted. Maybe it was the weather. Or he didn't have enough fiber in his diet. Or a combination of all three.

"You know, I hope that's Randall's umbrella. I hope the guy's as miserable and cold as us," excuses aside, when the light changed to green, Mike chose to finish his thought without a hint of remorse instead of walking into the street, "I don't care if he's coldblooded. The guy's way too serious for his own good!"

"C'mon, you don't mean that."

"I certainly *do* mean it!"

"Randall's just really... focused," the words didn't quite sound authentic as Sully led the procession of monsters into the street, "He's a good scarer. It's just..."

" - he lacks an appreciable sense of humor, scared the bejeebus out of the last group of interns from M.U., has an unhealthy obsession with beating your record and constantly walks into doors because he refuses to wear glasses. Which is good, because Randall would be a lot more intimidating if he didn't always look like he was trying to read the excessively small fine print," Mike could have easily continued listing personality traits about their coworker he didn't particularly like until they walked through their front door. An anthology existed in the darkness recesses of his mind. An Encyclopedia Monstruosus. Oh, he could understand being competitive. Scaring was a cutthroat and ruthless business.

But holding a deep-seated grudge over something as idiotic as losing the Scare Games?

Talk about childish.

"Oh, and lest we forget..."

Yet contrary to expectations, Mike didn't broach the subject. He was a mature monster. Assistant and best friend to the scariest monster in town. He had dignity. Class. Something as stupid as a grudge didn't mean anything. It was dust off his shoulders. A distraction to be brushed aside and ignored. Which was why, upon following Sully into the street and stepping around a monster with six legs, four arms and holding three large umbrellas, he added off the record, "... he thinks he's some big shot when everybody knows *you* are Monsters Inc.'s. best scarer since 'Screaming' Bob Gunderson retired."

"Hey, that guy was a *legend*."

A peal of bellowing thunder followed by more than a few honking horns shook the city as Sully shrugged off the compliment, "You know, I heard he's teaching Advanced Screams and Roars at Fear Tech. What I wouldn't give to learn from the guy who patented the infamous 'Wendigo Scream.'

"Well, aren't you humble."

If it was possible to sound annoyed and humored simultaneously, Mike was well on his way, "James P. Sullivan, Humblest Monster of the Year," miming holding a microphone towards his friend as they walked down the block in the pouring rain and rounded the corner, he cleared his throat as horn after horn honked, "Mister Humble, congratulations on your eighth consecutive win of this prestigious award. What do you have to say to your adorning fans about - "

An unmovable mass - in other words, Sully - interrupted Mike right before he reached the punch line.

"Hey," rubbing his face, Mike walked around his friend, baffled by the uncharacteristic behavior nearly causing him to chip a fang, "What's the big idea stopping in the middle..."

Upon running eye-first into something completely unexpected, Mike's complaint drifted into confused muttering. This time, entirely of his own volition. To his surprise - and not only his surprise, but Sully's, every monster stranded in the rain and the bumper-to-bumper traffic stretching backwards as far as the eye could see - Siren Boulevard, the quickest way to get home other than driving, was closed. Barricades lined the street. And for good reason. The recently repaved road was utterly destroyed. Demolished. And decimated by something best described as less devastating than the embarrassing aftermath of George's bachelor party. It was difficult for him to see anything, mostly thanks to the Monstropolis's Municipal Service sending every truck to a single location, but a massive fracture split the street down the middle like a bad hairline.

"What happened?"

Astonished to the point he couldn't think of anything witty or sarcastic, he nevertheless offered his opinion on the disaster stretching nearly to Fifth Avenue, "This street was fine ten hours ago!"

"How strange..."

Equally baffled by the devastation, Sully half-turned, shrugging along the way while nearly hitting an awning with their umbrella, "You know, I think the street's closed, Mike."

"Ha. Ha. Ha. Very funny."

Mike rolled his eye at the blatantly obvious sarcasm clinging to Sully's taunt like a bad case of fleas. As bad as his day was, it could be worse. He could be standing in the rain, miserable and cold, waiting hours and hours for someone above his paygrade to explain why the road seemed to have been melted. But clearing his mind by imagining a hot meal before kicking back and watching highlights of the big game he'd missed last night, he turned around, breathed deeply and proceeded to walk back the way they came, "Come on, we'll take Seventh Avenue. Oh, you know, we should try out that new

Bamboo Manor place that opened last month. Jeff *highly* recommends it, and you know how much he can't stand anything tastier than expired mayo on moldy bread."

"Alright, but we're splitting the bill this time," a monstrous chuckle overshadowed the storm as Sully followed with the umbrella, "Don't think I've forgotten that stunt you pulled -"

His ear twitched.

It was faint.

A noise.

"Hey, Mike," intuition slapped Sully across the face. He couldn't explain it. Couldn't understand it. And he definitely couldn't describe it with words. But something had changed. Brow furrowed into a perplexed frown, mouth pursed and fur rustling in the constant wind whipping through the city, Sully stared over the crowd and down the street at something beyond comprehension, "Do you hear something?"

"Hear something? What are -" he heard nothing at first. Just rain, footsteps, muttering and the sound of his own annoyance. But after snapping his mouth shut, holding a hand against his head, and ignoring the background footsteps, ongoing traffic and Sully's breathing, Mike heard a sound, "Yeah... it almost sounds like someone -"

"SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!!"

A doppler-shifted yet distinctively feminine voice cut Mike off mid-sentence

"SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!!"

She wore clothing, more than most monsters, and certainly more than was appropriate considering the weather, season and wind chill.

"SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!!"

Nobody saw her coming until she was already on top of them. In an explosion of natural speed, she bolted through the open gates leading into Gloom Park, vaulting over the assembled trucks and vehicles emblazoned with CDA on the sides. Wearing a full-body black coat with matching boots and gloves, hood fluttering against the back of her neck, she landed on an obnoxiously bright yellow car, slid down the windshield and hood on her ass, stepped ankle-deep into a puddle and proceeded to barrel through the unsuspecting crowd.

"SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!!"

Monsters of all shapes and sizes were thrown aside, offered little more than breathless apologies despite the mysterious monster never actually hitting them.

"SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!!"

Like an automaton, the monster apologized left and right. And the weight of her excuses short-circuited every electronic within range. Engines stalled. Streetlamps flickered. Buildings lost power, yet not before every light fixture and appliance burst into sparks and fireworks. The entire street went dark. And in that momentary darkness, eyes wide and messy navy blue and red hair laying matted against her forehead from the rain, said monster *sprinted* past Sully and Mike, allowing them to catch a glimpse of the peculiar weapon grasped firmly between her claws before the accompanying shockwave spun them in circles.

"SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!! SORRY!!!"

Apologizing faster and faster, the monster skidded around the corner onto Siren Boulevard.

And the moment she disappeared, CDA agents streamed out of Gross Park, pouring into trucks faster than a civilian could call in a

code 2319 on a white sock.

"... me?"

Spinning around, eye rotating like a wound clock, Mike finished his thought long after its welcome ran out.

BOOM!!!

It wasn't an explosion that shook the street, more like the theory of an explosion. Or something close enough to convince everyone. The *boom* sounded dull. Forced. A good proximity of something detonating. Oh, there was a bright blue light shining from somewhere down Five Avenue. And what he'd come to believe in the next few hours were sparkles of twisted stars. But as the CDA screamed through traffic after the monster, sirens and alarms forcing other monsters off the road, Mike saw something soar straight up into the clouds. It looked like a motorcycle. It sounded like a souped-up engine. But it was no engine. And it was certainly no motorcycle.

Which was why as whatever it was disappeared into the thunderstorm, leaving behind trails of blue light *floating* midair above the ground, Mike pulled his jaw off the ground, blinked and asked the only question on every monster's mind within a twenty-block radius.

"What the hell just happened?"

Last edited: Jul 30, 2020

Chapter 20.4

[img: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/c/ce/EP17-01_Satsuki_Kiryuin.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/750?cb=20140512193856]

The portico had once teemed with Heartless. The creatures manifested from the shadows as easily as one drew breath. One could not walk without the abhorrent monsters clawing for their heart. Yet standing beneath the entrance proper to the desecrated castle she could only remember as Hollow Bastion, Satsuki Kiryuin gazed upon the peaceful darkness that filled the clear night skies. Pale moisture dissipated inches beyond her lips. The breeze accentuating the softness of late autumn fading into early winter caressed her face. Goosebumps percolated down her arms. Her hair fluttered in the wind coursing around Hollow Bastion's contours. Yet throughout it all, her expression remained passive and unchanging.

No matter how much time passed, the heavens retained their immeasurable beauty.

An endless sea of stars, countless and innumerable, stretched into the infinite darkness. Each star defined another breathtaking world. Each brilliant twinkle of light signified someone's heart. Breathing softly through her nose, Satsuki listened to the peace and tranquility following the hard-earned victory which liberated Hollow Bastion from Maleficent's control. Yet her thoughts turned towards something far more important. Whether by Ryuko's hand or Mickey's, the Door to Darkness had been closed. Echoes of the accomplishment reverberated across time and space itself.

She did not need Yen Sid or Merlin explaining what she could feel with her heart.

But if that was the case...

... did that mean *their* world was restored as well?

"Is something on your mind?"

Her expression softened into familiar dispassion.

He wore a garish and particularly gaudy red and purple sweater with matching pajamas bearing cartoonish version of chocobos and moogles. An outfit Mankanshoku had spent quite the considerable fortune purchasing. Not that she had any right to complain considering Ryuko had bought her something similar. Arms clasped against the small of his back, barreled chest thrust forward and open-toed sandals slapping against the portico, Ira Gamagori crossed the reasonably short distance between Hollow Bastion's front gates and Satsuki before gazing at the unfamiliar stars and nebulae filling the cloudless, moonless skies, "It is a beautiful night, is it not?"

Satsuki feigned ignorance when Gamagori did not stand at her side, but rather loomed over her shoulder, eclipsing the artificial illumination penetrating cracks within Hollow Bastion's façade, "How did you know I was here?"

"When I worked at my uncle's ironworks, there was a small roof near the southern foundry."

Addressing the question without really answering anything, Gamagori's grey eyes narrowed at the abhorrent sequence of stars eternally drifting above the northeastern horizon. He had believed it nothing more than Mankanshoku's wild imagination. Weeks of imprisonment hadn't dampened her exuberance. Yet the pattern vaguely resembling Mato's infamous Rending Scissors strained his patience, "Every night, I would climb a rickety ladder onto that rusted deathtrap and fall asleep underneath the stars, imagining each pinpoint of twinkling light was a distant world."

Something about Gamagori's soliloquy further softened Satsuki's exhausted heart.

"The heavens are nothing more than an ocean of worlds recomposed from the memories of children."

A sigh whispered between Satsuki's parted lips as the proverb faded into the darkness, leaving a deafening silence pressing against ears numbed by the cold. And standing underneath the moonless heavens, she balked at such disgusting nonsense. She held no compunctions about the Keyblade War and the connotations lurking beneath the poetic verbiage. History was written by the winners. And it was common sense that the victors of such a cataclysmic confrontation would deign to write themselves in the best possible light. The world might have been torn asunder during the Keyblade War. Destroyed by the darkness writhing within the hearts of every man and woman. But brought back thanks to the hopes and dreams of children?

Ludicrous.

Did she believe the world had been torn restored? Yes. But not by children.

For what child would conceive of the monstrous history which had nearly consumed their world?

What young and innocent mind bereft of pain, suffering and loss would *willingly* fathom Life Fibers and Ragyo Kiryuin's depravity?

"Why are you here?" the question clung to the darkness, granting efficacy to the pale wisps curling around Satsuki's face.

"Do not take me for a fool."

Gamagori's jawline twitched without an ounce of animosity plaguing his words. Warm yellow and orange lights peering through Hollow Bastion's stained-glass windows danced upon tanned skin, highlighting fireflies and other insects clinging to some semblance of normalcy. And in that false sense of safety, thoughts returning to the cataclysmic events which had necessitated his undivided attention

so earlier in the morning, he spoke matter-of-factly, refusing to mention the self-proclaimed 'ninja's' attempt at appropriating a pair of kunai and oversized shuriken from the eastern wing, "You left your door ajar before taking this midnight sojourn. You obviously have something on your mind. Do you wish to discuss it?"

"No - "

Satsuki frowned, an ephemeral confession which disappeared into the darkness, " - but I know you won't leave until I do."

Whatever the reason behind her loquaciousness, Satsuki craned her head upwards and stared at the stars resembling so many diamonds with an almost melancholic expression, "Ryuko's birthday was two weeks ago."

"Ah - " begrudgingly acknowledging the personal confession, Gamagori grunted, " - you're worried about Matoi."

Silence passed through Satsuki's lips before her heart understood she'd said anything, "This is the first time since Honnouji we weren't together to celebrate it."

Originally choosing silence over opening his mouth, the man once priding himself as Satsuki Kiryuin's unbreakable shield folded his arms, muscles bulging beneath his gaudy sweater's custom-made sleeves. It seemed obvious in retrospect. Something his younger self would have undoubtedly denied. But despite her childish immaturity, Matoi was a passionate and kind-hearted individual who'd thrown herself into darkness on multiple occasions to protect those who'd lacked the means to protect themselves.

"As a Keyblade Master, Matoi's duties are dangerous," carefully considering every word, Gamagori closed his eyes before continuing his thought, "And there are those who'd sacrifice their hearts to ensure her demise. But make no mistake - Matoi is still your sister. Not merely by blood, but by noble intent and determination against the strongest of odds. It would take something significantly greater

than mere darkness to prevent her from returning at the most inopportune time imaginable."

Standing firm in the autumn night heralding the oncoming winter, Satsuki listened to her own heartbeat, "Of course."

She counted what few lights flickered across the slowly rebuilt town. To the ignorant heart, they were mere lights. Evidence of occupation. But to her... to what she'd fought and bled to defend... they symbolized newfound possibility. This world had nearly succumbed to Maleficent's darkness. Yet for all the malevolent sorceress's boasting, she'd been no less mortal than herself. Magic could enhance one's defenses and ward off lethal damage. But magical prowess amounted to *nothing* when one wasn't granted the opportunity to react. Add an unhealthy obsession with believing herself the greatest practitioner of black magic in the universe, Maleficent was an incredibly ill-tempered woman ruled by emotions and grudges.

Which had made it incredibly easy to thrust Muramasa through the shriveled corpse of an organ Maleficent called a heart while she'd been distracted with Lulu.

Of course, she hadn't expected the vile witch to survive.

Or escape into the chapel.

And turn into a fire-breathing dragon with some help from Xehanort's Heartless.

But no plan was perfect.

"Perhaps I'm being oversentimental," it would take some time. Maleficent's corruption lingered. Heartless continued emerged from the shadows despite Sora sealing Hollow Bastion's Keyhole while Beatrix dealt with that Behemoth. But eventually the beauty she remembered would return, "But I'm not the only one concerned with such matters, now am I?"

Somewhere in the distance, crickets chirped and owls incessantly hooted.

"I heard you and Mankanshoku arguing," as the night dragged onwards, dawn relentlessly approaching, Satsuki breathed softly, "Is everything alright?"

"We weren't arguing."

Clearing his throat with a cough bordering on a choking grunt, Gamagori glanced every direction but the woman who dragged the truth out of his heart without so much as breaking her stride, "Last Wednesday, I received a message through Mognet Central from Regent Cid. After profusely apologizing for not being about to protect Mankanshoku from Maleficent's idiotic henchman, he made it a point to offer me the position of 'regional manager in charge of restoring and rebuilding the Theater District.' A position with a generous pension plan and six-figure stipend."

"Ah..."

Looping a strand of hair around her finger before tucking it behind her ear, Satsuki politely quipped, "That certainly explains Mankanshoku's screaming."

Nothing more needed to be said. Gamagori's strained explanation left no room for argument. And she felt no desire to press the issue. Someone unfamiliar with Mankanshoku might have confused her thunderous outburst, born of unadulterated greed and avarice, as emotional turmoil. An egregious yet understandable mistake more than one person made over the years, "Am I to presume this means you'll *finally* be able to pay back every Gil Ryuko loaned you... with interest?"

"WHAT!?"

Screaming loud enough to rouse the dead, Gamagori's head snapped towards Satsuki like a whip. Such an absurd comment

could not go unchallenged! Perhaps, when he'd still been settling down, and only upon Mankanshoku's insistence, he'd *begrudgingly* accepted Matoi's financial aid. But every Gil borrowed during those few months had already been returned to Matoi! And in full! Yet his annoyance immediately wilted beneath the conniving smile adorning Satsuki's normally dispassionate façade, leaving him unable to do anything besides begrudgingly turning aside and biting the inside of his cheek.

"... amusing."

An entire moment of awkward silence passed between Gamagori and Satsuki, the former of whom folded his arms across his chest, if only to keep them occupied, before he addressed another matter.

"Speaking of which - " it had nothing to do with the previous topic, but unable to fathom Satsuki sharing Matoi's atrocious sense of comedic timing, Gamagori shifted gears, refusing to acknowledge the abject truth staring him in the face, " - how much longer do you plan on staying here?"

"I don't know."

"Without a dedicated military force, protecting Hollow Bastion will be difficult," snorting at the half-assed excuse, which could only have been uttered with the intent of arousing his annoyance, Gamagori rolled his shoulders, "Unless you permanently move to this depressing world, you'll never be able to ensure it doesn't once more fall into the hands of someone as egomaniacal as Maleficent."

"Tempting -" Satsuki drawled somberly without acknowledging the underlying issue, " - but you underestimate Leon and the others."

"Do you honestly believe they are capable of defending this world?" Gamagori responded.

"It's difficult to say. With the Keyhole secured and the Door to Darkness sealed courtesy of Ryuko and Mickey, the Heartless have

lost a considerable amount of power. They still pose a threat, yes, but their numbers are more manageable," as she spoke the truth, refusing to varnish facts with unnecessary lies, Satsuki breathed deeply, wisps of vapor passing through slightly moistened lips, "The Hollow Bastion Restoration Committee should be sufficient for dealing with standard Heartless incursions."

The organization might lack the means to destroy Heartless, but they could keep the creatures at bay.

"As for me?"

Her hair rustled in the autumnal breeze, tickling her face and lingering on her cheeks before falling onto her shoulders. And when she spoke, answering her own question without an ounce of humor, eyes staring beyond heaven and earth, Satsuki *knew* Gamagori was listening, "There's something I potentially need to deal with."

"You're referring to our uninvited guest?" Gamagori did not need to hear anything else to understand *whom* Satsuki was talking about.

Satsuki said nothing, a distinct coldness harder than diamonds clinging to her heart.

"According to Aerith - " suspicion sat heavily upon Gamagori's tongue as he offered some semblance of an answer, " - he appeared within minutes of Zack Fair crash-landing outside town," he didn't know *how* Aerith Gainsborough knew something so particular. But it had worried her. Tremendously so. Enough that she'd ran to the castle, demanding to personally speak with Satsuki, "The timing cannot be coincidental. More likely than not, our 'guest' is Harime wearing some sort of disguise, perhaps similar to the one she used to fool Matoi at Honnouji. If we consider *why* Zack Fair flew from Thebes, she probably intended on silencing him before he could divulge what he knew."

"No."

Satsuki shook her head, dismissing his answer without considering the implications, "He has nothing to do with Nui Harime nor Life Fibers."

Gamagori's expression did not change despite Satsuki's perceptible apprehension.

"I suppose that's some relief," he could not recall the last time she'd expressed such blatant worry. Neither Maleficent nor Xehanort's Heartless had evoked more than a slight change in tenor, "An average villain we can deal with. Something created from Life Fibers would be a more troubling adversary."

"Perhaps."

Clack! Clack! Clack!

As she strode forth, every *snap-clack* of her heeled boots echoing against Hollow Bastion's darkness, Satsuki half-listened to Gamagori, hearing every word but lacking the motivation to speak. She was no stranger to darkness. Nor the allure of power. There would always exist weak-minded fools desperate enough for the barest morsel of strength they'd cast aside their individuality without a second thought.

Clack! Clack! Clack!

"Or perhaps not," on the periphery of her senses, an egotistical darkness flickered. Yet she ignored him. Not simply out of principal, but because she refused to play by someone else's rules. If - or rather, when - she deigned to confront the intruder, it would be on her terms, "It all depends."

Clack! Clack! Clack!

Arms folded when Satsuki about-faced and began marching back towards the castle, Gamagori belatedly inquired, "On what?"

Clack! Clack! Clack!

With one final *clack* of her heels, Satsuki stopped mid-stride, brow furrowed and steel blue eyes narrowing as a black feather fluttered through the darkness and landed on the ground in front of her, "On whether the man wielding Masamune desires tasting Muramasa's darkness-forged steel."

Last edited: Aug 5, 2020

Chapter 20.5

["What's this, some kind of card?"](#)

"It's far *more* than a card. It represents opportunity," accentuating every other word, Marluxia stepped around Sora, having teleported behind the suspicious wielder of the Keyblade when Sora glanced at the newfound card, "Merely hold the card to open the door. For beyond the threshold lies a familiar world."

Chuckling, he vanished into the darkness, a brief sojourn from prying eyes.

"Proceed, Sora," with the slightest lapse of time, the graceful assassin reappeared atop the steps, "To lose and claim anew, or to claim anew only to lose," and once Sora finally spun around, following the sound of his voice, Marluxia sidestepped the Keyblade wielder's glare so closely resembling Roxas's. Naminé's abilities were powerful. However, changing the bonds connecting memories and hearts required time. And that necessitated Sora take the first few steps of his own volition, "... the choice is yours..."

Darkness wrapped around his non-existence before Sora or his friends could object to the purposeful vagueness lingering within the faux prophecy.

"Hmm..."

As silence pressed upon his heart, leaving him confused and bewildered, Sora stared at the spot where the mysterious figure had been standing only moments prior, "A choice?"

"Something wrong, Sora?" Goofy asked.

"No, it's just - " searching for the right words only to find nothing, Sora flipped the weirdly-shaped card over in his fingers. A card woven from his memories. What was that supposed to mean? The

card itself was a bright shade of blue, which was pretty normal. But it felt warm, like it had been sitting in the sun. And he wasn't sure, maybe it was nothing more than his imagination, but for a moment, he swore an image shimmered on one of its faces, " - something about this place doesn't feel right."

"You're telling me!"

Caught between attempting to *forcefully* set one of the plinths ablaze despite the so-called rules of the castle and wondering why the King would come to a screwy place in the middle of nowhere, Donald smacked his staff against the floor before grumbling, "I knew we shouldn't have come here!"

A painting hung on the wall. No larger than four by three feet in dimensions, it depicted a ruined castle covered in snow and ice, canyons and mountains stretching as far as one's eye could see. And staring at the strange piece of baroque artwork, Goofy scratched his temple before asking, "But Donald, didn't ya just say you thought King Mickey was here?"

"I changed my mind!" huffing at the question, Donald stomped angrily in the other direction, distracting himself with a different piece of artwork.

Always expect the unexpected.

Ryuko told him that once or twice. And Satsuki said something along the lines of never ignoring the impossible simply because your heart believes it to be impossible. And what could be more unexpected than something as impossible as this? Sora stared at the card, then at the pair of doors atop the stairs and then back at the card, strange thoughts whispering in his heart. No matter how much he wished otherwise, he couldn't ignore the feeling *something* about Castle Oblivion was off. How many worlds had they explored only for everything to go off the rails as soon as they ran into some Heartless? How many times had he expected one thing only for something completely different to jump out of the shadows?

Why would Castle Oblivion be any different?

"It feels like Riku and King Mickey are here," giving voice to his confusion, Sora pressed his hand against his chest, "But isn't it strange how *none* of us thought Ryuko was here?"

"I - "

Donald opened his beak to argue against Sora's ridiculous question only to realize he couldn't. With one finger pointing at the Keyblade wielder and another section of his mind ready to shout at Goofy *not* to touch the expensive-looking artwork, the court mage stopped himself pre-rant. Why had he believed the King was here and not Ryuko? Muttering suppressed obscenities impossible to replicate under his breath, he folded his arms and grumbled, "Something's real screwy about this place!"

"Say, fellas..."

One arm folded over the other, Goofy's brow furrowed into what resembled an introspective frown, "I just thought of somethin'."

"Huh?" Distracted, Sora and Donald turned towards the knight, "Like what?"

"Maybe it's just me, but I think this fella with the flowers and the guy we fought at Hollow Bastion might be workin' together," it was an odd thought, to be sure. And maybe bits and pieces didn't fit together. But no matter how much he tried shaking the feeling, Goofy knew he was onto something, "Or maybe they have the same tailor."

"Say - you might be onto something," Jiminy, perched on Sora's shoulder, rubbed his chin, "Although, if I remember correctly, wasn't Ryuko wearing a similar coat?"

"Great, just what we need. Another mystery," Donald grumbled, shaking his head, "I still think this is a trap!"

"Maybe it is a trap..."

The admission lingered inside Sora's heart despite his best attempts at pushed past the memories. Gripping the card as hard as he could, he bit the inside of his cheek, unable to make a choice. Did they turn around and leave without looking for their friends? Did they walk deeper into Castle Oblivion and whatever lied beyond the doors? If they couldn't remember how to fight or use magic, how could they protect themselves? No matter how many questions formed inside his heart, Sora kept coming back to the obvious - this was a trap. But if it was a trap, that had to mean Riku was here! But he knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, Ryuko wasn't. Because nobody could take down a Keyblade Master like Ryuko.

"... but so what?"

Clenching his hand, Sora considered the consequences before deciding to push forward regardless of whatever might happen, "If our friends are here, we need to find them. [And no matter what happens, we'll do it together!](#)"

As always, things proceed to move forward, false light or not.

Darkness grows. And light rises to meet it.

[Orchids and roses,](#) colors faded and petals brittle, sought impossible solace from the changing seasons.

The approaching winter whispered against Alexandria Castle.

Snow touched the peaks of the distant Aerbs Mountains.

Burdened by guilt that had only begun to fade yet comforted by the knowledge her mistakes weren't permanent, Aqua willingly confessed everything she could remember to Master Beatrix and Sir Steiner. She left out not a single detail, choosing to deal with the consequences of the truth instead of the dark comfort accompanying lies. Starting from the moment she departed Yen Sid's tower and

ending with Gilgamesh pulling her to safety while Mickey and Ryuko finished closing the Door to Darkness alongside Sora, Aqua pressed a hand over her beating heart, fingernails curled against her palm.

By the time she'd finished, Adalbert Steiner stood with his mouths agape.

And Beatrix pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Ryuko - " frustration and pride blossomed inside the master's heart upon hearing, through Aqua, of her former pupil's escapades. And the foolishness required to willingly cast aside common sense. She was angry. She was annoyed. But more importantly, she was relieved knowing Ryuko was fine. The scars crisscrossing her right shoulder, undeniable evidence of the fateful battle, for the first time in years, no longer itched. The lingering pain vanished. And yet with more than her fair share of exasperation, Beatrix judgmentally swept chestnut brown hair behind her ear and sighed, " - you truly are exceedingly reckless."

People thinks the Keyblade War was some 'cataclysmic event.'

An 'unprecedented' shattering of reality.

And, to be fair, they'd be right... and completely wrong.

It's all matter of perspective.

Far below the open-air hangers allowing McDuck Enterprises' latest models to fly off the shelves... beneath the recently renovated modern lobby with the perpetual waterfall... several floors underneath secretive research and development projects powering the conglomerate's competition against Mognet Central... Houka Inumuta reached forward and, with effort normally reserved for ignoring Mato's latest escapades, pressed a button.

Click!

Long-disused circuits flipped on. Electricity hummed against his ears. The smell of ozone filled the stale air. Industrial lights that hadn't seen guests since the laughably irritating Beagle Boys attempted something similar to corporate espionage flickered into life, casting dusty yellow cones upon countless pieces of recently shipped equipment.

"Let's see... it should be around here somewhere..."

A quick survey counted more than twenty apparatuses and assorted paraphernalia. Some of which seemed rather obtrusive. But there *were* a few pieces he recognized. High-quality purification centrifuges. Negative pressure chambers. Standard, off-the-shelf equipment required to functionally manipulate Life Fibers while minimizing potential contamination.

Albeit significantly cruder than the models once utilized by Revocs and Honnouji Academy's Sewing Club.

"Ah, there it is."

Taped onto the front of a containment apparatus was a piece of paper.

'Inumuta, did the Vernal Equinox fall on a Sunday this year?'

It required a handful of seconds, most of which were spent turning over the message, to translate the innocuous question, "... hmm, third panel down and to the left, was it?"

And spending another minute circling around the abandoned machinery, examining each and every inch, Inumuta knelt down, removed the slightly loosened panel beneath the main user interface and searched for whatever Satsuki dedicated so much time and energy concealing from Beatrix, Regent Cid and the others. His fingers moved through wires and dusty metal. More than once, he almost cut himself. But soon enough, he felt something different. And pulling back his arm, the reformed hacker examined the worn leather

journal. Even after all these years, Satsuki hadn't lost her touch. Someone who desired learning their secrets wouldn't dare taking anything apart, especially something as important and necessary to Life Fiber refinement as the outdated pieces of junk gathering nothing but dust.

"Interesting..."

Flipping through the pages, half of which had been torn out and most bearing diagrams and figures, Inumuta quickly realized *why* Satsuki sent the journal to him. Not only was it quite encrypted, what he *did* recognize was heavily alarming.

"I'm going to need some coffee."

Alright, thousands of Keyblade wielders dying SOUNDS awful.

But the consequences of allowing light to prosper were even worse.

Everything I did, I did to prevent an even greater darkness from reappearing.

Sitting cross-legged upon a mountain above a foggy village marked by a pagoda, Genji Armor piled neatly on the ground next to him, Gilgamesh tipped back the cup of sake.

It's hard to describe what seeing the future is like.

Imagine a game a chess where you know every possible move.

Surely, you think, nothing can be a surprise if you can see the future?

True - until someone unexpected comes along and flips the board.

The windswept graveyard remained scarred by recent events.

Rusted Keyblades untouched for millennia lay scattered and broken about the dusty landscape marred by new craters and fresh chasms.

Noxious dust choked the air.

The setting sun cast beams of orange, yellow and fading red across cavernous deserts.

And in the midst of this decimated landscape, crouched upon one knee and cracked visor resting against a massive Keyblade, an armored silhouette, burnt and dented, raised its head as the anger and hatred... the fury and revulsion... which had blinding him for so long abated for the briefest of moments. His fingers tightened around the Keyblade. His tattered cape fluttered. And just when it looked like he would move, he lowered his head, scattered thoughts and memories filling his empty existence like grains of sand.

Talk about getting caught off-guard.

Instead of allowing others to dictate her actions, she follows her heart.

She refuses to let anyone stop her from doing what she feels is right.

Guess I shouldn't have expected anything less from the great 'Hero of Lindblum.'

On the Naught's Skyway overlooking the darkened city, Xion and Roxas merrily shared a large pot of reheated chicken ramen.

Nearby, tucked between two Keyblades that couldn't be more different, a Moomba plushie stared judgmentally at the moonless skies.

I might have missed the grand finale, but Ryuko's quite extraordinary.

Synchronizing the light within her heart to perfectly match the Void's darkness?

Maybe it wasn't Ultima. Not truly. But it was still rather impressive!

"Huh - "

His luck couldn't be *that* horrible, could it? Ugh, of course, it was. But hey, countless Heartless of all shapes and sizes, some looking like cartoonish gladiators and others floating high in the air, was better than getting chewed out by Phil for missing a single training session. Well, maybe. It was touch and go. But it was better than dealing with an annoyed minotaur rampaging through the markets because a certain god of the dead thought it was funny to send his hired goons at the crack of dawn, " - it's a good, old-fashioned welcoming party."

The joke went unanswered thanks to the Heartless lacking any sense of humor.

And Zack sighed.

"Talk about a tough crowd."

His spiky hair swept back and forth as the sweltering Greek sun beat relentless on the back of his neck and arms. Dusty boots scrapped along the dirt, slowly yet cautiously retreating until Herc's statue, which he still thought was a bit too much for the guy, blocked out the sunlight. He'd expected something interesting to happen as soon as he got back. Medusa or one of her sisters wreaking havoc after another poor sap turned them down. Or Hades hatching some hair-brained scheme to kill Herc, defeat Zeus and the other gods and take over Olympus.

But Heartless?

He didn't know whether to feel insulted or impressed.

Couldn't they wait until *after* his date?

"Boy, oh boy," exasperated by how much nonsense that sisters of fate were throwing at him, Zack shook his head, sighed and grumbled. In that order, "The price of leaving is steep."

"You look like you could use some help."

A smirk wormed its way onto Zack's face when someone decided to crash the party.

"Not really. Well, maybe a little," was it terrible that the first thing that came to mind when facing the prospect of a one-way ticket to the Underworld was a bad joke? After thinking about it for a few seconds, the hero, first-class chuckled. There was a time and place for everything. And what better time to lighten the mood than being surrounded by hundreds of Heartless. Catching a hint of blond hair and the tell-tale sound of cloth fluttering in the wind, Zack reached over his shoulder, latched a thumb around the well-used broadsword and unsheathed it in a flourish of shimmering light, "My legs *are* a little cramped. And there's this awful kink in my shoulder..."

"As immature as always."

Standing back to back with Zack, remnants of tape falling from the Buster Sword, Cloud shook his head, "Maybe you should consider retiring and letting someone else play hero."

["I can retire when I'm dead."](#)

Despite the plaza being filled with the droning of Heartless, their unholy sounds and noises grating on his heart, Zack chuckled, "Besides, unlike a certain someone without a sense of humor, I've got a date. And she'd kill me if I died."

"I - ugh - whatever," unable to comprehend what he meant, Cloud pushed around the hero, blue eyes sweeping away from Zack to the swarm of Heartless growing larger with every passing second, "So, you find out Exdeath's partner?"

"Yeah, some crazy broad," sweating beneath the midday sun, Zack nonchalantly approached the Heartless, dust bellowing around his boots, "Apparently she's supposed to be insanely strong or something."

"Sounds annoying," Cloud dryly responded without missing a beat.

"Hey - " and continuing the back-and-forth conversation while facing down Heartless seeking nothing more than to devour their hearts, Zack asked, " - you done working for Hades?"

"More or less -" acknowledging Zack's question in the most noncommittal manner physically possible, Cloud swung the Buster Sword off his shoulder until the massive slab of metal rested firmly in his hands, " - but let's save the chitchat until later. I don't think the Heartless are going to wait much longer."

Life Fibers sure are interesting creatures.

But that doesn't make them any less dangerous.

Innately connecting with alternate worldlines...

Linking futures and pasts that both existed and never will exist.

Standing on the beach, foamy water flowing between her toes as the tide slowly crept up the sand, Kairi watched the sun slowly descend below the horizon.

If she loses control of her heart, the world could be thrown into chaos.

People that have long since returned to the Lifestream could waltz into our world.

Hmm... perhaps it's better to eliminate her now, before something terrible happens.

A glowing sigil spun beneath her feet.

The skies darkened.

Electricity crackled along the length of her arm.

"THUNDAJA!!!"

Lightning *exploding* forth would not have done the technique justice. Magic did not merely stream from her staff, arcing along its contours like water. It materialized out of existence itself. The moment she uttered the word... giving life to the determination roiling inside her heart... currents of overpowered arcana smashed through reality. Column after column of electrical discharge crashed downwards, hitting their intended target without mercy.

"Very good, Yuna."

The sultry admission possessed neither arrogance nor contempt as the dirt and grass kicked into the air rained downwards, exposing a translucent blue shimmer, "I'm glad your skills haven't atrophied in my absence."

In a single heartbeat, the tides of battle immediately reversed. Reality sundered by calamitous explosions of magic reasserted itself. Sunlight peaked through dissipating clouds. Claps of thunder shook the heavens. And in the epicenter of her pupil's attack, standing without injury or mark of dust on her dress, Lulu smirked. The beaded braids dangling from the six ornamental pins in her hair shifted ever-so-slightly as the Onion Knight normally clasped in her arm stood on the ground, perfectly mimicking her pose. Manicured fingernails painted a peculiar shade of magenta were splayed, nearly pressed against a hexagonal barrier marred by several cracks.

"However - "

Magic danced around Lulu's arm, invisible to the mind but beautiful to the heart, caressing her fingers in patterns reminiscent of musical composure, " - you let your guard down."

"AAAAAHHHH!!!"

Crimson eyes narrowed mischievously when a certain someone found themselves teleported above Lake Obel's cold depths, "Unless your enemy is dead, always presume they have another trick up their sleeve."

A wistful sigh escaped the black mage's lips. When it came to magic, pride heralded the fall. A sorceress, no matter how powerful, was neither immortal nor invincible. All it took was one mistake. One inattentive moment. A reprieve to brag at one's adversary. Magic required imagination and *intent*. It required focusing one's heart upon a singular task. Magic could do anything and everything. Yet it also did nothing. Magic could protect from the strongest attacks, but only if you saw them coming. A lesson Maleficent learned the hard way.

Perhaps there were better ways of teaching Yuna such a valuable lesson.

But that wouldn't be fun.

"Now then..."

Strutting through the grass, droplets of water hovering midair around her dress only to fall to the ground upon her eventual passage, Lulu did not help Yuna's sputtering attempts to swim back to shore. She could have helped. It would have been easy. But instead, crooning as her apprentice staggered onto the shore, dripping wet and miserable, Lulu nonchalantly asked, "... what have we learned from this experience?"

Nah, Ryuko will be fine!

Everything I said might be true - but her heart is exceptionally powerful.

And she has friends and allies to keep her on the right path.

Outside a castle which long since doffed the mantle it had once possessed, Nui Harime smirked devilishly with a face not entirely her own.

Of course, I am a little bummed about nothing going according to plan.

The future I'd seen... the unavoidable events I wrote down... is no longer guaranteed.

But maybe some things are better not known.

Inside a room separated from the standard flow of time, warded against those who'd succumbed to darkness, [a solitary figure sat slumped upon a lonely throne.](#)

For years, they did not move.

Until something changed.

A connection.

A slumbering memory.

And for the briefest of moments, one far too quick to possibly grasp, a finger twitched.

Besides, when push comes to shove, Ryuko's heart is in the right place.

She's simply not one to lose her heart over anything.

Of course, problems DO have a way of sneaking up on people.

Such as the absolute nothingness dwelling beyond her darkness.

Rubbing the towel against her face, Ryuko groaned into its woolly depths.

Beads of water trickling down her arms and legs, pooling around her toes in faint imprints, she blew a strand of matted hair off her nose.

It had taken nearly half a day to escape the horde of monsters, fly across the universe, get sidetracked by an orbital Heartless platform with homing missiles and lasers, almost crash into a couple of freaking meteors before finally reaching Lindblum. She'd been hungry and tired, wanting nothing more than to close her eyes and sleep. And what did she find? What was the first thing her heart noticed as Threadcutter soared over the world-city, cresting buildings and passed airships at just past three in the freaking morning?"

Her house - along with most of the goddamn world - covered with scaffolding.

"God... *damn*... it..."

Most of her kitchen was ruined. Her dining room was destroyed. And her living room resembled the aftermath of rampaging chocobos during mating season. But the upstairs plumbing still worked. How? She had no fucking idea. Such was the miraculous engineering of Lindblum. Pulling the towel away from her face, naked as the day she was born except for another towel, Ryuko yawned as she stumbled through the steam billowing from the bathroom into the relatively colder hallway, entered her room and kicked the door shut with the sole of her foot.

"It just never *fucking* ended..."

The first thing she'd tried doing upon getting home was take a long and hot shower.

Unfortunately, much to her frustration, someone had squealed to Captain Basch that 'Master Ryuko' returned. And before she could say 'I'm hungry and tired and if you don't let me take a goddamn shower, I will bury you outside town,' she was talked to Minister Artania, who looked like he'd gotten out of bed. She couldn't remember the details. Everything was fuzzy. But she remembered

Artania escorting her to Regent Cid, who shook her hand, asked if she needed anything and then ignored her request by telling her everything. Not some minor details like Maleficent invading Lindblum while she was gone or Satsuki stabbing the second-rate bitch in the back. Or Xehanort having a freaking Heartless despite every word of that sentence making no goddamn sense whatsoever!

Everything.

By the time she stumbled through what remained of her front door, the sun was cresting over the Industrial District.

"Tch!"

Half-naked inside the walk-in closet, Ryuko leaned against the wall with her fingernails digging into plaster, "Mako's safe. That's all that matters."

A dollop of water dripped from her matted hair, tickling the tip of her nose before splashing against the hardwood floor between her feet. She was pissed Pete broke into her house looking for something. She was double pissed she hadn't been around to protect Lindblum from Maleficent's army of Heartless. She was triple pissed someone - Pete - smashed her prized Rickenbacker into pieces. And she was infinitely pissed Maleficent had the goddamn nerve to kidnap, let alone touch, a single hair on Mako's head. Knowing that vile sorceress took Mako... locking her best friend inside a lightless prison for weeks... was nearly enough motivation to learn how to bring Maleficent back from the grave just so she could re-kill the bitch herself.

She didn't give two shits about Satsuki and Lulu sending Maleficent into an early grave. She didn't care about the credit. Or everyone calling her a hero. Because no matter how many people called her a hero, even if Beatrix said those words herself, everything that happened was her fault.

If she'd finished off the bitch instead of stabbing her in the leg and allowing herself to get distracted at the last minute, thousands of innocent people would be alive. Mako wouldn't have gotten kidnapped. The princesses of heart would be safe.

And who-knows-how-many worlds wouldn't have succumbed to darkness.

In the midst of her rant, a shirt flew out of the closet.

Followed by a bra, baggy jeans and an expensive yet horribly tasteless coat Satsuki bought last year for her birthday.

"No point bitchin' about it now."

Dressed as well as she'd ever be after spending nearly an entire day awake, Ryuko stormed out of her room, Threadcutter locking the door along the way. She might be upset. Really upset. But crying about her problems wouldn't change anything. The past was done. The past was over. No amount of whining would change it. *Could* change it. The only thing anyone could do was to keep walking forward, placing one foot in front of the other while doing everything possible to not make the same mistakes twice.

"Alright - "

Stepping through the broken remains of her door, Ryuko clapped her hands together, breathing in the autumn chill clinging to the morning, " - time to buy a new gummi ship."

She had money. Lots of money. And Scrooge was something like a friend, not that friendship meant the duck would give her a discount. So, he'd give her another gummi ship at retail price. But she'd never hear the end of it for losing a customized ship in the first place.

"First things first - I gotta get something to eat," stopping halfway across the plaza when a yawn forced itself out of her mouth, Ryuko

leaned backwards until something in her spine audibly popped,
"Ugh, I wonder if -"

"RRRRRRRRYYYYYYUUUUUKKKKOOOO!!!"

It started far away.

Really far away.

And by the time Ryuko recognized the quickly doppler-shifting scream, she'd already reverted to her natural instincts.

Bracing both shoulders for impact and tightening her stomach, she caught the approaching missile moments before impact. One hand gripped what felt like an ankle while the other latched onto a wrist. Then she began spinning. And spinning. And spinning even faster while redirection the overwhelming momentum through both of her hands to the ground. And only when it no longer felt like she was staring into a category five hurricane of sugar and excitement, did she carefully flip Mako counterclockwise and right-side up.

"Mako!"

A grin stretched across Ryuko's face, "How are - oof!"

Only for Mako to force the air from her lungs.

"Ryuko! You're back!" Mako wrapped both arms around Ryuko's waist and squeezed. It was a hug. A monstrous hug. One full of love and joy. And while hugging her best friend in the entire universe, she blubbered, words erupting from her mouth as a stream of unending consciousness, "Where were you? Where did you go? Did you get me anything? Did you fight super powerful bad guys!?"

"One question at a time, alright?"

The questions ricocheted around inside Ryuko's skull, careening into each other until only a mismatch of jumbled words escaped her ear.

"Geez, I just got back a few hours ago," but that didn't matter. Something as useful as breathing, while important, took a backseat to the really important things. Affording a pleasant smirk overwhelmed by Mako's happiness, she freed one of her arms from her friend's unbreakable embrace, "If you're that interested, I'll tell you all about - huh? Where's Gamagori?"

"He's busy talking to Old Man Cid," Mako confessed while releasing Ryuko from her 'welcome home' hug, "Not Mister Cid, the other Cid. The one that says you're the worst pilot he'd ever seen."

"Oh. Right. Him," Ryuko grumbled under her breath, remembering those conversations - as in plural. Or rather, eight. Seven if the nonsense over Traverse Town last year didn't count for shit, because how the hell would she know a Heartless shaped like a flying goddamn house would crash into her ship? That wasn't even her fault, "Anyway, forget him! How'd you know I was here?"

"How could I *not* know?"

A moment passed in silence.

Ryuko stared at Mako.

Mako smiled back.

"Makes sense," shrugging away the recursive logic behind Mako's answer, Ryuko tried smiling only to find herself unable to do so, "I'm just *really* happy you're alright, Mako!" looking over her best friend for anything out of the ordinary, which really didn't simplify anything, she grumbled, "Maleficent didn't do anything nasty to you, did she? Because if she did, I'm gonna bring her back to life just so I can kick her ass myself!"

"Nope!" Mako passionately nodded, "She locked me in a cage for three weeks with only my thoughts and a few specks of dust for company."

Ryuko felt her heart lurch at the description, "Mako... I'm sorry I - "

"Oh, you don't need to apologize. After all, you were busy saving *everyone* from darkness! And everyone is way more someone than me," tilting backwards until almost she just about fell over, Mako smiled. Not only at Ryuko catching her, but at how many people Ryuko saved. And that smile, more than anything, demolished whatever guilt remained rotting inside Ryuko's heart, "Besides, since you were super busy, Lady Satsuki gathered everyone and anyone to rescue me like I was some princess trapped in a forgotten castle! Even Sora fought some really tough bad guys! And with a Keyblade just like yours! Well, not quite like yours, but really close to yours!"

A *whirring* of blades destroyed the morning tranquility as an airship flew close enough overhead that Ryuko could almost see the assholes working through the windows.

"That sounds like a really interesting story. One I really want to hear," carefully ensuring Mako didn't fall over from excitement, Ryuko jabbed both hands into her jacket and slouched her way towards the nearby steps alongside an exhausted and loud yawn, "But first - breakfast. My treat."

"Not this time!"

Skating on sheets of metaphorical ice in front of her best friend in all of creation and then some, Mako spread her arms, bobbed her head and exclaimed at the utmost reaches of her indoor voice, "While you were gone, something truly amazing happened! Well, really amazing and super terrible! That mean old witch might've destroyed this city, ruined my evening plans with Gamagori and led everyone on a low-speed chase, but when one door opens, another window is broken! For, you see, Mister Cid asked Gamagori to personally rebuild the Theater District! And he accepted, which means we're making oodles of cash! That's why, although we're best friends, I must insist on paying for my own deliciously nutritious food!"

"Huh..."

A fly buzzed around Ryuko's slack-jawed expression.

"So... uh..." dragging out the words while following Mako's impressive train of logic from start to finish without jumping off the bridge, Ryuko ignored the familiar Burmecian standing on a rooftop across the district, "... does this mean you're gonna start paying me back every Gil I loaned you and Gamagori?"

"W-W-W-WHAT!?"

Mako's expression went from happy to downright terrified, breaking several laws of physics along the way, "B-But you said we don't gotta pay you back!"

"Hey, calm down! I was kidding!"

And like that, Ryuko felt like she'd kicked a puppy. A really friendly puppy. Feeling more than a little guilty at the tears bubbling around Mako's eyes - scratch that, she felt goddamn pathetic at messing with her friend's emotions - she brought Mako into a hug, "I'm rich, remember? No matter what happens, you don't ever have to worry about paying me back a single Gil, got it? Now, if you don't mind, after spending a few months in the realm of darkness, I'm freaking starving!"

CLENCH!!!

Ryuko barely made it three steps down the windy steps leading to the rest of Lindblum before something hard, sturdy and exceptionally durable latched itself around her right arm.

"Huh? Come on, Mako - I'm losing my balance - woah!" stumbling from the impromptu assault, Ryuko instinctively panicked. Her feet slipped. She felt gravity shift. Yet Mako refused to let go of her arm. Not that falling fifty feet onto a steeped roof was dangerous. For her. Or Mako. But paying for damages sucked. And paying for damages caused by something in her power to prevent sucked even more.

And hitting her head on a rock because she yanked Mako away from the ledge, spun around and lost her balance?

That goddamn sucked balls.

"Tch... ouch," Ryuko winced at the throbbing pain, which didn't fade as fast as she would have preferred, before pushing everything aside. Or tried too. Because with her head smashed against the ground, Mako was laying on top of her, both arms latched so tightly around her throat she could barely breathe, "What's with you?"

"I'm just *really* happy you're back!"

Tears spewed from Mako's eyes. Happy tears. Tears of joy. Tears that stained Ryuko's coat, which Mako didn't notice due to the ocean spilling from her eyes, "So, please don't leave like that again!"

Ryuko opened her mouth.

She searched for something to say.

And in the end, she decided to listen to her heart.

"Don't worry," warmth blossomed inside Ryuko's chest. A familiar warmth. One she'd long forgotten, "No matter what happens, I'm not going anywhere anytime soon."

Sniff!

"P-Promise?"

"Yeah," splayed on the steps as airships floated through the cloudless skies overhead, Ryuko pressed a hand over her heart and smiled, "[Promise.](#)"

[img:

https://64.media.tumblr.com/e4d97734a0ef6bc14b3d3bb040822823/tumblr_nbpa58qP2C1r32an8o2_500.gif]

Last edited: Aug 13, 2020

Chapter 21.1 [Day 357]

In medias res can be summarized as opening a story near the middle or end and then flashes back to events which led to the current situation. As I've mentioned, Chains of Memory and 358/2 Days would have been difficult to write from a simple narration - you know, start-to-finish, following a PoV from the beginning of the games to the end. It would be difficult to follow. And write. So, after much planning, I've decided on a different approach. Something that, if all goes well, will work a lot better. Basically, we'll start on Day 357 (and all that implies) before going back and seeing how things reached the current point.

[img: <https://i.imgur.com/Lbcm99h.png>]

A drop of rain touched his nose.

Followed by another.

And another.

"Hah... hah... hah... hah..."

He couldn't tell up from down, left from right or even light from darkness. Everything hurt. His stomach. His heart. His head. Gritting his teeth, he gripped handfuls of mud, clenching the soil between his fingers while the memories of the last few minutes returned.

Breathing heavily beneath grey pastels of thunderstorms, lying near a statue weathered by rain and time, Roxas tried standing only to stumble, falling onto his hands and knees and reintroducing the searing pain wracking his body. A drop of blood fell from his lips. His hair lay matted against his forehead. It hurt more than one of Lexaeus's punches. The pain sent him teetering on the edge of consciousness, filling his vision with darkness.

Shaking away the cobwebs, Roxas leaned against his Keyblade and *forced* himself to stand back up.

["Xion..."](#)

As lightning illuminated the Thunder Plains, his heart clenched. He'd been so close. So close to rescuing Xion. Ryuko's plan should have worked. Satsuki explained everything down to the letter. But it didn't work. Something went wrong. But what went wrong? What did he do wrong?

Clank!

When Xion landed in front of him, Roxas couldn't summon the energy to raise his Keyblade. All he could do was look at his friend. She was taller. Much taller. Her arms and legs were gangly. He couldn't see her face behind that blank helmet. But even after being transformed into a monster by that horrible woman, she wasn't gone. He could still feel her pain. And he could still sense Xion's sadness and despair, "... we're friends. You, me and Axel. Please... Xion... don't let her win..."

Xion didn't say a word.

Nothing.

Not even as she raised Senketsu, rainbows glittering around the malformed Keyblade resembling sewing needles stitched together.

The *snap-clack* of heeled boots against drenched rock grew louder and louder.

Dancing between individual raindrops, Satsuki Kiryuin did not so much sprint as she did *fly* across the Thunder Plains. Muramasa clasped in one hand, water dripping from the katana's pitch-black blade, while her other hand was covered in bandages, dried blood

clinging to cotton, she honed upon Roxas and Xion. Guided not by sight or sound, although both senses were useful, but by the clashing of light and darkness between hearts, flashes of bluish-purple lightning highlighted resigned acceptance and begrudging acknowledgement.

Her hopes had been dashed harder than a boat upon rocks.

She'd stood aside and assumed the best only to be proven utterly wrong.

Enveloped within the raging inferno of wind and water desiring nothing more than drowning Burmecia's hopes, Satsuki effortlessly cleared the newest chasm scarring the inhospitable landscape. In that same ephemeral breath, adrenaline coursing through her veins, her heels touched upon drenched stone, the double *snap-clack* masked by thunder. Howling winds and nearly horizontal bands of rain concealed her approach. Lightning roiled the heavens as tired fingers tightened around Muramasa's samegawa, a slight flick of her wrist reflecting what little ambient light existence. Thick eyebrows knitted together while waist-length black hair billowed around her face, exposing the faded scar upon her upper right cheek.

At the moment of her arrival, she swung Muramasa into Senketsu, intercepting the Keyblade in a cataclysmic eruption reverberating to Burmecia itself.

BOOM!!!

Reality itself trembled upon the impact as the immovable force that was Satsuki Kiryuin clashed against the unstoppable juggernaut who'd cast aside her name. Detonating in pulsing waves resembling liquified magic, variegated stars twinkled within torrential floods of condensed space-time. Monstrous caricatures of crimson and cerulean danced before narrowed eyes. Strained ears painfully rang

from thunderous paroxysm as the storm blown aside by the clashing of their blades reasserted itself only for the secondary eruption of antipathetic forces to once more create another vacuum.

Left hand crossed over the right while spots of blood staining bandaged fingers, her expression remained unreadable as she held her ground.

KA-BOOM!!!

Another explosion shattered the earth beneath their feet.

But Satsuki was unimpeded.

Forced upwards by the geological eruption transforming the Thunder Plains into jagged mountains and knolls, she bent at the waist, knees nearly pressed against her chest and spittle flying between her clenched teeth as the accompanying concussive detonation attempted to drive her backwards. But struggling against the laws of physics themselves, Satsuki drove one heel into the disturbed debris soaring outwards. With a resoundingly loud *snap-clack*, she used the boulder as a repurposed springboard, palm pressed flat against the horrendous surface before adrenaline and magic coursing through her veins granted her the means and opportunity to reverse her momentum and once more clash with the berserk teenager.

All in the span of a heartbeat.

BOOM!!!

While Muramasa clashed with Senketsu far more times than she cared to count, each confrontation of metal upon metal disturbing Burmecia's fragile balance as she danced alongside the fleeting eruptions, Satsuki's attention snapped towards the opaque visor disfigured by cracks. It was apparent for anyone who knew what to look for. Shinra-Koketsu. The unholy dress that would have allowed Life Fibers to subjugate humanity. No matter how many years had passed, she could never forget that nightmarish piece of clothing.

Nor the sensation of Absolution Domination upon their hearts. And it appeared Ryuko - and by associated, Xion - had not forgotten either. The resemblance between Xion's armor and Ragyo Kiryuin's funeral gown was uncanny.

Yet Xion *wasn't* Ragyo Kiryuin.

Time stopped.

The rain paused.

The world faded.

And Satsuki found herself standing in a white void, face-to-face with Xion.

A girl whose heart was drowning in anger and self-hatred.

An innocent soul seeking relief from the false revelations Nui Harime drove into her heart.

Time resumed.

The void faded.

Finding herself back in reality before her heart could properly comprehend the intimacy lurking beyond spoken words, Satsuki's pupils dilated for all of two seconds before composure reasserted itself. Her breath hitching, she did not allow what she witnessed inside that impossible void to distract her from the matter at hand. Brows furrowed and lips pursing into a glower, she took advantage of the destabilizing landscape to retreat. Flipping backwards, one leg trailing behind the other, and landing in a kneeled crouch upon rubble that hadn't yet recognized gravity, an irritated grunt was all she said when Xion decided to take the initiative.

"Whatever Nui Harime told you - "

Avoiding the heavily telegraphed attack, she bent her knees and leapt sideways finding purchase upon an overturned rock as her previous perch was destroyed, "- were nothing more than falsehoods designed to achieve her goals!"

Her words were spoken with complete honesty. She spoke from the heart, exposing pain and anguish long suppressed to someone who needed help more than anything. Yet despair clouded Xion's heart. The teenager refused to listen. Clenching and unclenching her fingers around Muramasa, irritation blossoming within her soul, Satsuki clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth before retaliating with a double-handed strike that reversed the course of battle in her favor.

BOOM!!!

"She is a monster who thrives on chaos," a resounding *clang* of metal upon metal grated against Satsuki's ears, momentarily dissipating the pearlescent radiance streaming from her heart, "She told you those things because she *knew* you would believe them! She implored you to seek out the truth because that is how she worms her way into your mind!"

A pillar of burning light missed Satsuki's face by the barest of margins.

Followed by another as soon as she landed.

"Your existence is utterly separate from Ryuko's!" yet the third such salvo was sliced asunder, torn into decaying motes of light beneath Muramasa's darkness. Driving herself forward into range, Satsuki leapt into the rain, spinning violently between dangerous pillars of heavenly radiance. Drawing inspiration from memories, her voice boomed larger than life itself as she descended, Muramasa meeting Xion's ascending Keyblade.

KA-BOOM!!!

"Your heart is your own! Nobody else's!"

Despite standing less than a third of her opponent's stature, Satsuki effortlessly drove Xion to her knees, "Don't let Nui Harime take that from you!"

A whisper of magic confessed Xion's plan before she retreated into the space between reality and nonexistence. Satsuki's hardened eyes immediately swiveled rightward. The corners of her mouth twitched. Muramasa shifted between her fingers. She could not deny Xion's strength more than resembled Ryuko's. But all the strength and power in the world meant nothing if one lacked experience. And with the emotional turmoil drowning the girl's heart, any advantages that may have been provided by Life Fibers were severely diminished.

Sharply pivoting when Xion rematerialized in a silent explosion of light, she immediately closed the gap, refusing the transformed teenager a moment's rest.

A subsequent guided strike deflected Senketsu sideways, throwing Xion off-balance and pulling her into the teenager's protective guard. Lurching forward, the leftmost corner of her mouth pulled into a snarl, Satsuki launched herself off the ground, latching her fingers around the helmet containing similarities to Shinra-Koketsu and Ryuko's former armor, inducing further cracks. And then lightning flickered around her arm. Electricity crackled around bandaged fingers. A low *hum* overpowered the storm alongside the smell of ozone. Yet before she could so much as pronounce 'Thundaga,' Xion's Keyblade split into multiple blades resembling sewing needles.

The same blades once wielded by Ragyo Kiryuin.

Cursing under her breath, she dashed backwards as the eight blades abruptly closed the distance.

All but one missed.

Blood splashed upon her cheek when the final needle, slipping around Muramasa by the barest of margins, sliced open her neck.

"Very well -" the burst of pain momentarily surprised Satsuki before her expression twisted into contemptuous fury, " - If you refuse to listen to reason - "

intimately aware of the blood gushing from her neck, she rushed forward, her heels crashing upon solid rock with an unyielding *snap-clack*, each step scattering rain and mud. By the time she was halfway to Xion, a brilliance surpassing the disgusting light radiating from one who'd fallen victim to Nui Harime's darkness turned twilight into daybreak. And with one final *clack* bringing her within arm's reach, their respective faces inches apart, Satsuki snarled, " - then allow me to convince you!"

Xion attempted to move. She *did* move. And faster than expected. But not quickly enough. But the time her Keyblade reversed directions through the torrential downpour, it was too late. In the space between two heartbeats, every last drop of light disappeared into Muramasa's dark depths, transformed polished darkness into pure white. Her grip tightened. Her brows furrowed. And thoroughly aware this was likely Nui Harime's intent from the moment she lured Ryuko to Burmecia for a 'grand reveal,' Satsuki nevertheless declared without a trace of hesitation a phrase which reverberated upon the darkness itself.

"DIVINE RADIANCE!!!"

Far away from the battlefield, Ryuko's heart skipped a beat before she shook her head and continued chasing Nui Harime.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip.

As the thunderstorm resumed, Satsuki softly exhaled, exhaustion giving way to tempered resolve as she beheld the newfound devastation.

The ground had been torn asunder by her power. Not scarred, but stricken clean, every shadow disintegrated beneath overwhelming brilliance.

Xion was gone. Not dead, merely driven back.

Even with the monstrously efficient regeneration afforded by her Life Fibers, it would take Xion some time to recover. The parasites were powerful. But they weren't invincible. They had weaknesses. And those whom associated themselves with the parasites rather than humanity generally overestimated their prowess until it was too late.

Cognizant of the Nobody running towards her, she callously flicked Muramasa lengthwise across her body, scattering the water and light stubbornly clinging to the pitch-black blade.

When she was younger, determined to defeat Ragyo Kiryuin and free humanity from the shackles of Life Fibers, she wouldn't hesitated striking Xion with her full power. If not to stop the teenager's emotional rampage, then to protect countless innocent lives. But now? Gently pressing a hand against her neck, blood seeping between her fingers and staining soaked bandages, Satsuki felt neither happy nor content with their triumph. The wound upon her neck was evidence of that. It was the price of pride. The consequence of the arrogance and hubris which had clouded her judgment until it was nearly too late to save Xion.

["Roxas - "](#)

Stanching the bleeding with the least amount of magic required, she glanced towards the Nobody, " - are you alright?"

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine," the emerald shimmer disappearing long before he sprinted across the barren landscape, Roxas winced, lingering

memories of Xion's betrayal causing him to press a hand over his stomach. He shivered, not from the rain or the cold, but something more. Something that made his heart clench, "But Xion's in pain! If we don't save her, she'll die!"

"Saving her is no longer possible."

Satsuki's tone, forceful in a way Saix's had never been, cruelly drove the warmth from Roxas's heart, "What? No! You said - "

"I'm afraid we can no longer reach Xion's heart."

Lightning flashed through the skies, illuminating Roxas's growing despair, " W-What? But you saw her back there! You saw her stop fighting! I can reach her! I know I can!"

Refusing to confess the truth, if only to spare Roxas unnecessary pain and anguish, Satsuki stared into the rain, eyes closed and corners of her lips pinching. She reminisced about her youth. To once again be the student council president of Honnouji Academy, not for power or control, but to guard her heart from the torture of failure and guilt. Yet those days were long passed. She was no longer that person.

Clack!

The snap-clack of her heeled boot against the ground only served to highlight the conflict tearing her heart asunder. This hadn't been the plan. She'd hoped Roxas's friendship would be enough to rekindle Xion's humanity in much the same way Mankanshoku had rescued Ryuko from the suffocating anger and hatred wrapping themselves around her heart. But it appeared Nui Harime's vile influence was too powerful to overcome, not even with the strength of friendship, "We cannot save someone who does not wish to be saved."

"No! I refuse to believe that!"

All of Roxas's emotions... the consequences of everything that happened since leaving Axel and the Organization to find answers... broke through the surface of his heart. Anguish and despair bubbled within his chest as tears ran down his face. He'd betrayed Axel, the first person who called him a friend and not someone who had a Keyblade. He destroyed Vexen's research after Larxene *bragged* about Xemnas preparing something to destroy Xion. He'd cast away his pride as a Nobody when he begged Ryuko and her friends to rescue Xion from that horrible monster.

Unable to bear the guilt of everything he'd done having amounted to absolutely nothing, Roxas angrily swung his Keyblade towards Satsuki.

"You said you'd be able to help Xion! That you knew how to save her!" Roxas felt his heart clench tighter and tighter with every word, an aching pain so terrible his arm couldn't help but tremble, "Was that nothing but a lie!?"

The silence was deafening, broken only by distant thunder.

"I'm her friend... I'm her friend and I couldn't help her," despite threatening Satsuki, Roxas couldn't muster the courage to look her in the eye, "What gives you the right to decide who lives and who dies? Why does Ryuko get to be happy while Xion doesn't? Tell me... tell me what makes Ryuko so special..."

Clack!

The *snap-clack* of Satsuki's heel was so faint that even her own heart did not register the noise.

"If there exists any chance of saving Xion," speaking in a tone reminiscent of a hushed whisper rather than the normal confidence permeating her heart, Satsuki listened to the pouring rain carrying echoes of Xion's unimaginable pain, "She must be willing to accept our help."

"... what does that mean? Are you telling me... are you telling me Xion doesn't want our help?"

Slowly turning aside and glowering as Roxas stammered out his confusion, Satsuki returned to the events proceeding and following the Naturals Elections, "Nui Harime's strings have wound too tightly around Xion's heart," biting her tongue, she clenched her hand, leather crackling from the intensity of her emotions, "It's an insidious and cruel trick. A manipulation the Grand Couturier prides herself in accomplishing."

Spitting out the title as if it were poison, she took a deep breath and sighed.

"Nothing either of us say or do will change her mind," thunder rumbled nearly over their heads, followed by arcs of blinding lightning. But Satsuki found no happiness in the Thunder Plains' natural beauty and splendor, "Her heart drowns within an ocean of darkness. She will stop at nothing to reach Ryuko, even if that means killing countless innocent men, women and children. No matter my personal feelings, I cannot allow that to happen."

Roxas could say nothing.

His heart felt like it was breaking.

"I did not lie to you."

Barely hearing Satsuki's voice over the pouring rain, Roxas opened and closed his mouth several times, "What?"

"Ryuko experienced something very similar to Xion's emotional breakdown. And Mankanshoku was genuinely honest when she said the power of her friendship was enough to rescue my sister's heart from darkness," a streak of lightning flashed through the heavens followed by thunder so loud it caused Burmecia itself to tremble. The storm relentlessly unleashed its fury upon the landscape, drenching

everything beneath a sea of endless tears, "But I was wrong. And for that, I am sorry."

A tremor rumbled through Roxas's heart.

Water dripped from his Keyblade, trickling in cold rivulets down silver and gold metal. Roxas wanted to hate Satsuki. He wanted to make her feel what he felt. But he couldn't. When Nui told him about Xion being some sort of clone, he thought, maybe, that might be important. And when Axel refused to say that was a lie... when everyone at the Organization said it was true... he'd been unable to accept it. Xion was her own person, nobody else! She had her own hopes and dreams! Her own memories! She smiled! She cried! She laughed! She had a heart larger than the ocean! But after meeting Ryuko... after seeing the Keyblade Master with his own eyes... he realized the truth.

Everybody had been completely wrong about Xion.

"So, you're just giving up?"

Roxas didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to think. His heart felt heavy. His chest hurt. He wanted to shout. He wanted to attack Satsuki. He wanted to save Xion no matter the cost. But in the end, unable to come to a decision, he couldn't do anything but watch Xion recover from Satsuki's attack. Just like he couldn't help Xion when Nui Harime appeared in Twilight Town, "The 'great' Satsuki Kiryuin is giving up? Am I supposed to accept that!? Do you expect me to stand here and do nothing? How can I just stand here... and do nothing?"

Satsuki said nothing.

For there was nothing she could say.

Not to him.

Leaping from statue to statue, pausing only long enough to recover her bearings while silently wishing for forgiveness from the great kings and queens long passed, it had taken Freya Crescent less than three minutes to reach Satsuki Kiryuin and the strange boy wielding a Keyblade. The pink ribbon tied to her tail flickered upon the howling wind when she appeared upon the lightning itself, landing next to Ryuko's sister with nary a sound.

"Sorry for the wait," perched upon a knee, Freya hefted the holy lance of His Majesty upon her shoulder. Much had changed over the years, yet many things remained the same. Clad in purple platemail armor bearing the Burmecian coat-of-arms upon the front, a single green eye peaked beneath silver-white hair and knight's helmet at the utter devastating paining the solemn Thunder Plains, "But His Majesty's safety takes priority. I would not have come if Sir Fratley hadn't broken off from the pursuit with something belonging to your sister."

"I see."

As the ground lightly trembled not from thunder but something far more dangerous, Satsuki sheathed Muramasa before accepting the Rending Scissors. The blades felt warm between her fingers. A warmth not unlike that of a sunny day. Or friendship. Taking one scissor per hand, allowing them to settle in her grasp, she listened to her beating heart, counting each heartbeat and subsequent quiver, before finishing her previous thought, "Has Ryuko killed her yet?"

Freya only shook her head.

"That... woman..." unable to think of another word to describe the monster, the dragoon grimaced, "... I do not know. She was still breathing when Ryuko handed me her scissors and followed King Mickey and Sir Fratley out of the palace," her brow furrowing, Freya's snout twitched at the obnoxious presence clinging to the rain. A darkness weaving itself alongside rainbow light so intense she couldn't help but narrow her eyes, "Your plan has failed, I take it?"

"It hasn't - "

"That isn't important," interrupting Roxas before he could finish, Satsuki asked, "How long can you hold her down?"

Concealed beneath her bone-white hair, the contours of Freya's face subtly shifted, "A few seconds at best."

"Very well - " memories and nightmares surfaced inside Satsuki's mind as she prepared herself for what needed to be done. Clenching the Scissor Blades until her knuckles blanched white, she swept the blades lengthwise, water dripping from their impossibly sharp edges as her expression settled into a firm scowl, " - than that must be sufficient."

Last edited: Aug 19, 2020

Chapter 21.2 [Day 224]

[img: <https://i.imgur.com/tldpu17.png>]

"Okay! What's the big idea!?"

"Xion..."

"I take it you're the transfer student who was rude to Lady *****."

"Xion..."

"I'm the captain of the girl's tennis club, *****. Please to meetcha."

"Hey... Xion!"

With a *pop*, the dream fizzled out. The vague images faded, leaving darkness until she opened her eyes, blinked and closed them again. Her neck hurt. Her arm was asleep. And there was a light burning her eyes. She wanted to keep sleeping. Sleeping was wonderful. Sleeping was the best thing ever. But slouching off the hard roof she'd been using as a makeshift bed for the last five or so hours, mid-length hair disheveled more than usual and drool trickling down the corners of her mouth, Xion smacked her lips together, "[... uzzit... stupid tennis ball dress...](#)"

"Tennis ball... dress?"

Caught between a rock and a hard place trying to comprehend Xion's incoherently sleep mumbling, Roxas stood on the ledge, blinking awkwardly with two sea salt ice creams slowly melting in his fingers, "Another strange dream, huh?"

"Yeah..." yawning into the back of her hand, Xion rubbed her neck and wiped the drool from her mouth. Clasp one hand in the other,

she stretched her arms, groaning as muscles and bones audibly popped. Another day, another dream with people and places she could never quite remember beyond vague impressions and colors. But this dream felt different from the others, "... but I think Larxene was in it. Or someone who looked like her. I dunno..."

"That sounds awful."

"It's not so bad," she defensively returned, frowning at the fuzzy memory of *really* wanting to take dream-Larxene down a couple of notches, "I think I punched her..."

"At least your day's going swell," handing Xion one of the two sea salt ice creams, Roxas let gravity do most of the work as he collapsed on the ledge next to her, "Today's mission was such a drag."

As the ice cream hit her tongue, salty yet sweet at the same time, Xion tried holding onto her dream only for the last remnants to fade, "Let me guess - Xigbar did something stupid?"

"If you call shooting a three-headed demon dog and making me fight it as 'survival training,' then yeah," Roxas shuttered. Survival training, Xigbar called it. Sharpen his instincts. Hone your Keyblade form for future battles. Maybe Xigbar believed that weird nonsense. But if he didn't know any better, he would've thought the guy had enjoyed watching him running away from Cerberus. If not for the Zack guy arriving in the nick of time, he would've been demon dog food, "Hey, did your hair change again?"

Xion looked up.

Or tried looking up.

Pulling a strand of hair over her crossed eyes, she let go, watched it slowly bounce back into perfect shape and hummed. She couldn't remember when it started. At first, it had been just one bang of red sweeping rightward no matter how often or hard she brushed.

Something that made her stand out next to everyone else. A defining characteristic like Axel's red hair or Marluxia's pink hair or Xemnas's premature silver hair. She'd tried staring into a mirror, watching some of her remaining 'normal' hair for changes. But it never happened when she wanted. Either she woke up with more of her hair changed or someone pointed it out, usually Xaldin or Demyx.

"Oh, it's been like this for a few days," half-talking to Roxas and half-holding a strand of hair between her finger and thumb, Xion's vision unfocused at the entrancing *ombré* - a word she didn't know but made perfect sense, "I actually stopped noticing."

"Well, I think it looks pretty cool," Roxas offered, earning a smile from Xion.

"Hey, hey..."

Emerging from the darkness, Axel saluted only to suddenly and inexplicably stop. Contrary to whatever anyone might have witnessed, he didn't stumble when his foot sunk into that annoying crack. It was more like a quick adjustment due to the corridor of darkness opening an inch or two above the clock tower. Nothing too embarrassing. Still, covering the near failure by whistling, he repeated himself, restarting the introduction from the beginning, "... sorry I'm late, Roxas, I got caught up with some - oh, hey, Xion, didn't see you there."

"That's rude," rolling her eyes, Xion did everything but stick her tongue out at Axel. And then she did, "What, do you want me to leave? Sheesh!"

"Huh? What? No! No, it's just, well... you see..." surprised by the accusation, the flurry of dancing flames stumbled over an apology, "C'mon, you know that's not what I meant!"

"I know," unable to hold the scowl any longer, Xion snickered, "Consider that payback."

"... payback, huh?"

While Roxas and Xion laughed, annoyance clung in Axel's posture. Grumbling under his breath, he turned aside, rubbing the back of his neck while doing his best to act like the bigger man. But boy, that was damn difficult. Because what Xion said didn't make sense. Payback? For what? It wasn't like he'd accidentally burnt her favorite Moomba plushie. Not a chance in hell would he ever do something so mean and cruel. He'd been out of the castle on a mission when it happened, as Saïx vouched when Xion immediately blamed him for the toy's wounded condition. Still, who would've thought Xion could hold a grudge? The more he thought about it, the more it scared him. For many reasons. Particularly since Xion was looking more and more like *her* every day.

Not enough to be a problem.

But more than enough for Xemnas to breathe down his neck about 'results' and unexpected mental changes.'

"Well, don't start making a habit of it," dislodging the thought from his mind, Axel sauntered around Xion, collapsed next to Roxas with a more-than-tired grunt, removed a magazine out of his coat and yawned into the back of his hand, "Otherwise I'm going to have to write you up for insubordination."

Time passed.

It could have been minutes.

Or hours.

The sun refusing to descend below the horizon made it difficult to keep track of time.

Chewing on the wooden stick, which was all that remained of her ice cream, Xion listened to Roxas tell her about his latest mission. She smiled. But she wasn't happy. No matter how much she tried, her

laughter felt hollow, even if nobody else noticed. Roxas's mission sounded really exciting, but the light inside her eyes dimmed. Staring across the twilight-covered town, eyes drawn towards the burnt scar stretching from mountain to mountain in the distance, she repeated a question over and over inside her head, slowly gathering the courage to ask what had been obsessing her for weeks, "Hey, Axel?"

Halfway through an article about chocographs, considered the rarest gummi blocks outside of star shards despite nobody knowing how they worked, Axel mumbled, "Yeah-huh?"

"What was Castle Oblivion like?"

A warning bell went off inside Axel's head.

Laying on his back, one arm propped beneath his neck and the other holding the magazine between the sun and his eyes, his mouth pursed into a tight grimace. Talk about awkward questions. But whether he liked it or not, he couldn't blame Xion for asking about Castle Oblivion. It wasn't exactly hush-hush *something* unexpected went down at their second base of operations. Sure, three of them had been traitors seeking to overthrow Xemnas using the Keyblade's power. Which was why he'd been ordered to eliminate them. Personally. With extreme prejudice. Of course, events at the castle hadn't gone according to plan. Sora and his friends might have taken down Marluxia while he convinced Vexen's little toy to absorb Zexion's power the old-fashion way - letting Saix rise up through the ranks as they'd planned.

But Larxene survived.

The real Riku had destroyed Lexaeus.

And Vexen met an exceptionally brutal death at *her* hands. Something he wished he hadn't memorized. He still remembered her laughter. Her sadistic taunting as deathly pale fingers callously crushed the poor bastard's throat like it was an overripe fruit.

Everything.

"The Organization used it as a research facility. Basically, a place to store useless junk. Like Demyx," trying and failing to read his magazine, something made difficult by the revulsion and nausea welling inside his stomach at the visceral memories, Axel eventually gave up, "Then... well... you know the story - someone wiped out four of our friends, leaving us to pick up the slack. Why? What's with the sudden interest?"

You're just a knockoff! A cheap imitation of the real deal!"

Xion's jaw clenched.

*"No matter how hard you try, you're absolutely nothing like **her**!"*

"It's nothing," muttering angrily around the half-chewed stick, she forced the hurtful words to the back of her mind and buried them, "Just curious, is all."

Underneath the orange-reddish skies and wispy clouds, the wind blew through Axel's hair. Yet he felt nothing but gnawing emptiness inside his chest. Opening his mouth, he quickly reconsidered. Slouched hundreds of feet above the ground, elbows resting on his knees and face warmed by the sun, he tried ignoring the subject Xion couldn't help but remember.

Thirty-four days.

More than a month.

"Right..."

That's how long it had been since that monster single-handedly caused a Heartless incursion on Halloween Town just to lure Roxas and Xion out of the castle. A fact he knew because Nui Harime had gone out of her way to describe how easy it had been to trick them. Letting his somber reluctance linger on the evening, he clenched one

hand into a fist and forced himself to focus on something less depressing, "You know, I've been thinking..."

"Guess there's a first time for everything," Roxas mumbled just loud enough for Axel to overhear.

"Oh, ha, ha," now firmly planted back on solid ground, he nudged Roxas in the ribs, causing the younger Nobody to fall into Xion like a pair of dominos. All while he couldn't help but smirk, "But seriously, doing missions all the time isn't healthy. Especially after..." stopping himself before he could say another word on the depressing subject, Axel leaned backwards and stared upwards into the sky, "... anyway, next time we have some time off, how about we head on over to Serendipity?"

"Serendipity?" Xion repeated the strange name, eyes slightly unfocused and brow furrowed.

"Don't tell me you've never been there," back in his element, Axel spread his arms towards the sky, crimson flames licking his fingers, "Well, it's like the Gold Saucer. Only there's less gambling and more roller coasters and chocobo races. And I think they have Blitzball shows on the weekends."

"I dunno... I'll need to ask Saïx for permission to go," Xion grumbled, pouting slightly, "And he doesn't know the meaning of fun."

"Don't worry about him," with a grunt and a tired groan, Axel popped himself onto his feet, muscles aching and one leg asleep from sitting too long, "I've saved up quite a few favors over the years. It'll take some begging and a bribe here and there, but I'm sure Saïx will fold like a house of cards. So, what do you say? Up for some good, old-fashion summer fun?"

"That does sound like fun," Roxas tried imagining everything Axel said only to come up short, "What do you think, Xion?"

"Aren't you the slightest bit curious? I mean, about anything?"

"Like those threads you use. Don't tell me you thought you were special!"

"Really, what WERE they doing at Castle Oblivion?"

"Yeah..." wincing at the memory, Xion forced herself to smile, ["... that does sound like fun..."](#)

Last edited: Aug 23, 2020

Chapter 21.3 [Day 225]

[img: <https://i.imgur.com/H0loScw.png>]

"What are you doing?"

The question sliced through the silence, "Were you, for some incomprehensible reason, trying to change next week's assignments?"

"I... err... well..."

Demyx laughed.

Or tried to.

But Saïx's glowing eyes and twitching fingers made that impossible, "No...? I mean, no! Of course not! That's *way* too much work! Besides, you changed the password last week!"

Refusing to accept Demyx's insincere platitudes as anything more than a pretense to avoid punishment, Saïx turned his attention towards the computer, eyes narrowed and expression slowly shifting into a characteristic glower. Something didn't feel right. He couldn't enunciate what, per say, that feeling was. Instinct, perhaps. Or common sense. Or something about how the idiot's motivations contradicted the apparent lack of concern clinging to his excuse. Whatever the reason, he reached out, manually inputting the twenty-digit password into the system with one hand, the other holding Lunatic in front of the melodious nocturne to dissuade any thoughts of premature escape.

Or escape, in general.

"Oh, really?"

With an unreadable expression masking annoyance, he initiated a special program. A window opened, detailing files and log ins. Yet nothing. There wasn't anything extraordinary or suspicious. Just members logging in, typing their reports and logging out, plus Axel looking up information on Ryuko Matoi, as to be expected given Xion's heritage. Nothing that might have granted inside into the idiot's plan to avoid responsibility for his actions. Which further annoyed him, "Then I suppose there's nothing stopping you from explaining your attempts at breaking into the computer."

His back painfully pressed against the wall, computer to his left, exit somewhere behind Saïx and a massive sword in his face, Demyx started sweating.

"It's not a big deal! I mean, I'll tell you, just... can you lower this thing?"

A metallic *clunk* as the claymore effortlessly rose another inch caused Demyx to reconsider his meager options. It wasn't like he expected Saïx to listen. The guy's head was way harder than metal. And for someone who didn't have a heart, he had an explosively short temper. But he didn't say anything of the sort, choosing to wisely keep such things to himself while the blunt yet impossibly sharp blade was pressing against his nose, "Alright! Alright! I wanted to see Xigbar's report! Happy?"

Saïx was certainly *not* happy.

"And why - " the luna diviner inquired with urgency one might reserve for discussing the weather, " - would you want to see *that*?"

"For a perfectly good reason, I'll have you know."

Defending himself against the scandalous accusation that he, Demyx, would commit such an egregious crime, the melodious nocturne tried standing up for himself only to remember there was a sword pointed at his neck. Still, unable to be deterred, he raised a hand - just one - and stared explaining, "Yesterday, while I was

underachieving twice as hard as normal to make up for last week's mission, I overheard Roxas talking about nearly getting crushed by a three-headed dog. Which sounded really bad. And strange since that wasn't in Xigbar's official report I happened to get a good look at when the guy crashed into me."

The self-professed luna diviner arched an eyebrow, curiosity coursing through his empty existence.

"Anyway, that got me thinking - if he left that detail out of his official report..." curling his fingers as he said 'official,' Demyx stepped around Saïx's sword, "... what other details might he have forgotten? And was this the only time? For all we know, he could've been doing this for weeks! That's prime blackmail material!"

"... blackmail?" Saïx's voice was colder than a blizzard.

I... err... oh..." realizing his error, the melodious nocturne gulped.

He would have brushed aside Demyx's excuse as nothing more than another last-ditch effort to avoid punishment for his actions. That the idiot confessed to something so outrageous irked him. Yet in this particular instance, Saïx could not. He would have preferred ignored Demyx, but his attempted criminality bolstered a suspicion he'd had for some time concerning Xigbar's reports. Missing fragments. Gaps in timelines Xigbar chalked up to 'uninteresting nonsense.' And after yesterday's mission to Olympus, a noticeable 'gap' starting with Roxas noticing the demonic guardian of the Underworld and ending with Xigbar claiming 'minimal burns and loss of dignity but otherwise no major problems.'

How long had this been going on?

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention," still irritated, Saïx dismissed Lunatic, allowing Demyx to steady his racing heart, "If anything were to happen to Roxas, our heart collection rate would drop by nearly thirty percent."

"Now just hang on a - wait, really?"

Caught halfway between proclaiming his innocence and making a break for the door, Demyx's passion deflated into an awkward cough. Never expecting Saïx to *agree* with his boring excuse, which was nothing more than random nonsense strung together, his mouth opened and closed before false bravado forced out a no-so-confident chuckle, "Er, I mean, you're welcome? Always glad to help!"

"As for your attempt at blackmailing another member of this organization..."

Taking no small amount of satisfaction from crushing Demyx's burgeoning hopes, Saïx turned to leave, affording his fellow nobody as little recognition for stumbling upon something helpful as physically possible, "You will rewrite every after-mission and battle report you've authored over the last three months. And then you will do the same for any mission report you've co-authored."

"Awww..."

Demyx grumbled, "... that's going to take forever!"

"I fail to see how that's my problem," ignoring the petulant whining sent his direction, something as impossible since Demyx lacked a heart and thus lacked the emotional capacity to *whine*, Saïx stopped halfway through the door, "But since it seems you have the energy to complain, I will be adding another mission to your schedule. Reconnaissance. First thing in the morning. Do not be late."

Swish!

The luna diviner spoke not another word as he departed the study, his footsteps heavy and presence unmistakable. Refusing to dedicate any more time than required on the idiocies surrounding the underachieving moron's criminal activities, he grumbled. No more than a slight displacement of carbon dioxide. And with his thoughts

cleared, Saïx furiously stalked his way through the Castle That Never Was, intent on hunting down Xigbar and making the bastard pay for *daring* to think he could hand in half-completed reports without suffering consequences.

If he had, he would have noticed Demyx's forced nervousness give way to something far more realistic.

"That was close."

Yet it wasn't Demyx's voice that passed through his lips. No longer forced to pretend to be the laziest member of the organization, Xion hurried over to the computer, which Saïx had forgotten to log out of after he yelled at 'Demyx' and started typing as fast as she could, "Who would've thought Xigbar actually did something like that. Boy, did I get lucky..."

Xion tried not thinking about *how* she could transform into Demyx. Or anyone else, for that matter. It was just, well, natural. As easily as breathing. She just *thought* about becoming somebody else, moved her hands in a specific pattern, allowed countless threads to emerge from her body and presto, she looked exactly like anyone else. Right down to their height and voice. But that was it. She just *looked* like someone else. She didn't gain their memories or abilities. Or even their personality, which meant spending hours practicing in her room on how to be Demyx.

And that hadn't been fun at all.

So, with an almost balloon-like *pop*, she took off the costume.

"C'mon, c'mon..."

Confetti-like crimson strings brushed against her face as she typed in her name, her rank, the word 'Keyblade' and everything else she could think of. She lost track of how many files she opened. Information scrolled down the screen. Data involving Nobodies, Heartless, Hearts and countless things she already knew. But

nothing important. Nothing that explained the dreams that almost felt like memories. Nothing that could point her in the right direction. Nothing involving the horrible woman who called her a 'cheap imitation' and a 'knockoff.'

Gnashing her teeth, Xion resisted the urge to punch something.

Like the computer.

But she didn't.

She simply continued opening files, fingers gliding smoothly above the keyboard.

But there was nothing.

Nothing she wanted.

Wait - what *did* she want?

And just like that, a strange and unusual name popped into her head, something she'd forgotten because it had never felt important enough to remember. Not until now. It was a name she'd overheard Axel mention to Saix several times. And Luxord and Demyx talk about when they thought she wasn't around. Oh, and Larxene mutter underneath her breath alongside some rather choice curses when she returned from Castle Oblivion.

"Ryuko... Ryuko... ugh, how do I even spell that?"

Error after error flashed across the monitors as she tried, again and again and again, to spell the name.

Beginning to lose her patience, Xion attempted one last spelling, sounding out the name with every stroke, "R-Y-U-K-O..."

Ding!

A successful *beep* preempted a rather large file appearing on the screen. And it was almost like someone let the chocobos out of the stable. As soon as she finished typing the rather strange name, the organization's symbol flashed into existence, followed by rows and columns of data, numbers, words and information heavily encrypted behind another password she couldn't hope to obtain. But two things stood out. Two pieces of information that caught her eye despite whatever security measures Saix put on the computer - a faded picture of Castle Oblivion's exterior and a phrase mentioned over and over again in bold, red lettering impossible to overlook.

"Life... Fibers..."

The phrase sat heavily on the tip of her tongue, "Why does that... why does that sound familiar?"

Memories flashed before her eyes.

Two memories.

She didn't know she hadn't remembered until now. Yet suddenly, as if opening her eyes for the first time, all the details were there, crystal clear as the day it happened. The first was during Roxas's long sleep. She'd been on her way to visit his room with another shell to add to his 'good luck' collection only to find Saix and Lord Xemnas talking in the hallway about something she couldn't hear. But one sentence stood out more than the others.

"We mustn't underestimate the strength of HER Life Fibers."

And another memory, one gleefully thrown in her face by someone who didn't know the first thing about having friends.

"Life Fibers! They're stronger than stupid-old darkness!"

"Life Fibers..." repeating the phrase, Xion stopped typing, staring at the floor with unfocused eyes as the horrible truth settled into her mind, "... does that mean she and I are - "

This is our power.

I awakened when I drank your blood.

And when you put me on.

Or rather, when I am worn by you.

We can activate that power.

What are you? Really

I don't know.

What? Don't gimme that!

You're just telling me how you work!

I can explain the current phenomenon.

But there is still much I do not know.

What you call 'memory,' I have gaps in mine.

I can't remember many things.

"UGH!!!"

Wracked by unimaginable pain, she collapsed to the floor, eyes squeezed shut and hands grabbing clumps of hair. It felt like someone was hitting her head with a hammer. Too many colors and sounds slammed into her mind. She was looking downwards from the ceiling, wearing something she couldn't recognize. Anger? Embarrassment? Surprise? The emotions were too much. Curled on the ground, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes, Xion tried focusing on the familiar voice, one that felt closer than anyone in her life other than Roxas and Axel. But she couldn't. It was just out of reach. Just out of range.

She didn't know how long she was unconscious.

But eventually the pain receded, allowing her to stumble back onto her feet, sweat covering her face and hands trembling, "What was... what was that?"

Repeating the question... over and over again until the words nearly lost meaning... Xion leaned against the computer, " Was that me? Was that who I was or - "

Knock! Knock!

Xion's breath hitched in her throat at the sound of someone knocking on the door. How long had she been lying on the ground? Acting quickly, she closed the files she'd opened, fled into the darkness and never looked back.

"... hello?"

He knocked a couple more times, just to err on the side of caution, such as Saïx or someone else working, before leaning through the door, one hand on the frame and feet adequately prepared to beat a hasty retreat if necessary. Eyes slowly swiveling from one corner of the room to the other, staring into each shadow in case someone was standing there, Demyx's curiosity quickly gave way to confusion, "I could've sworn someone was here..."

Now this was strange. Not normal strange but the 'Larxene returning from Castle Oblivion a little friendly type of strange, as strange as that sounded. The kind of bizarre strangeness nobody in their right mind - expect maybe Xaldin - took without an enormous mountain of salt. Which only added to his confusion. Because he had heard someone talking. Yet there wasn't anybody inside the room. Just emptiness and silence, plus a somewhat unnerving amount of apprehension. Taking a cautious step into the room, he scratched the back of his neck, whistled and promptly shook his head.

"I must be losing it - of course there's nobody here... *unless* they're invisible..."

Either someone managed to learn how to turn invisible... or he was hallucinating hearing someone. Neither of which he particularly liked, although invisibility would come in handy in his continued pursuit of the perfect underachieving relaxation destination.

"Woah!"

But that mental struggle vanished when something else caught his attention.

"Looks like today's my lucky day!"

A shit-eating grin stretched across Demyx's face as he approached the computer, which someone just so happened to leave running without logging out, "Demyx do this. Demyx don't do this! Since he thinks he's smarter than me, I should give Saïx some advice. But the moron probably wouldn't use it anyway! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Chapter 21.4 [Day 253]

[img: <https://i.imgur.com/s4Hx1TZ.png>]

Crunch! Crunch! Crunch!

With each footstep, the weather grew progressively worse. Cheeks numbed by the relentless cold, she took a moment to observe the surrounding landscape, a barren and inhospitable mountain range, before warming her hands with a small fire spell. Despite wearing gloves enchanted to retain one's body heat, her fingertips were growing numb. A chill raced down her spine, penetrating the double-layered parka. Frost clung to her sleeves. A sense of foreboding doom encroaching upon her heart only to retreat upon the slightest glare, refusing to so much as step forth into the light. Her breath emerged every handful of seconds, joining the surrounding wind while individual strands of black hair fluttered between rosy cheeks and the furred hood.

Crunch! Crunch! Crunch!

Yet, regardless of the dangerously frigid conditions, she cautiously shifted her hand towards the blade strapped to her waist, aware of what awaited upon the North Mountain's peak.

Crunch! Crunch! Crunch!

She'd felt *her* presence long before ascending the mountain.

Crunch! Crunch! Crunch!

An existence spitting in the face of decency.

Crunch! Crunch! Crunch!

The final *crunch* of her heeled boots against packed snow and sheets of ancient ice faded into the perpetual wind as a silhouette came into sharp focus, one she'd long presumed had been destroyed at Ryuko's hands only for reality to quickly dissuade her of that notion, "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't strike you down where you stand, Nui Harime."

Perched upon a frozen outcropping about twenty feet above Satsuki, the self-proclaimed greatest synthesist in the worlds and formerly stupendous Grand Couturier of Revocs warmly countered the former's grumpy scowl with a saccharine smile. She couldn't remember how long she'd been waiting for Satsuki. A couple of days. Maybe a week. Of course, she hadn't exactly *waited* on the mountain. Even if the cold didn't bother her, that would have been boring. Nope. She'd waited until Satsuki arrived on her fancy Gummi Ship, gave her waitress a good tip and hopped right over minutes before Ragyo Kiryuin's oldest disappointment broached the mountain's peak.

"Oh, don't be so melodramatic."

Interrupting Satsuki's silent glare with a curt wave, Nui uncrossed her legs, allowing Satsuki to take in her stylish pink, purple and white winter ensemble. For a while, she'd started to believe Satsuki wouldn't show up. Or she would show up, only with Ryuko. Or just Ryuko. Which would have been annoying. And ruined her plans, "We both know if you were ~really~ planning on killing me, you wouldn't have bothered saying anything quite so grandiose and pathetic."

Satsuki's thumb flicked Muramasa's hilt.

"You overestimate yourself," the former heiress coldly proclaimed in retaliation, sunlight gleaming off the barely unsheathed blade.

"Au contraire, Satsuki, I'm well aware you've gotten stronger. A lot stronger. *Way* stronger than when you forced yourself into Junketsu," in response to the not-so-subtle threat, Nui slouched forward, dark amusement flickering within eyes unnervingly similar to Ryuko's,

"But without those nasty Scissor Blades, you'll just be wasting both of our times. And coming all this way without telling anyone, not even Ryuko? My, my, my, I wonder if something happened between you two..."

The silence was nearly palpable.

Snow shifted underneath heeled boots.

Satsuki's hair billowed around subtly narrowing eyes.

A rock clattered down the mountain, courtesy of Nui Harime's right foot bouncing against the overhang.

And then Satsuki Kiryuin *moved*.

Or perhaps, one could say the world shifted out of her way. In a single moment impossible to accurately replicate, Satsuki bent her knees, tightened her stance, released a staggered breath and closed the distance between herself and the former Grand Couturier faster than most people could sprint with magic bolstering their speed. The pressure wave following her abrupt departure sent clouds of snow and ice erupting down the North Mountain's façade, creating a weak avalanche seen from the ground. The *crunching* of her boots dissolved into a muted cacophony alongside the metallic *shing* of Muramasa's darkness cutting through the sunlight.

No more than a second after moving, light exploded from Satsuki's heart, cascading outwards in torrents of pure willpower and determination as she leapt into the frigid air, Muramasa unsheathing itself faster than the psychopathic monster's unmoving eyes could follow.

CLANG!!!

Yet not fast enough to compensate for Nui Harime's Life Fibers.

"So, it's true," her breath condensing between clenched teeth, Satsuki *glared* at the pinkish-purple weapon struggling beyond Muramasa's cursed blade, "You possess a Keyblade."

"Uh-huh!"

No longer sitting down but standing on both of her feet, Nui smiled despite Seamstress quivering and trembling in perfect rhythm with her heart, "You like it?"

"On the contrary, I'm rather disappointed."

Countering the malevolent and dark smile with ruthless amusement bordering upon mockery, Satsuki scoffed, her lips quirking into a bitterly vicious grin, "In all my years, never would I have believed that you, Nui Harime, Grand Couturier of Revocs, would willingly *copy* someone else's designs, let alone someone like Ryuko's."

Nui's smile faded.

Seamstress stopped trembling.

Then she effortlessly sidestepped out of existence.

But not fast enough for Satsuki Kiryuin.

[img: https://thumbs.gfycat.com/CornyIdealisticAlligatorgar-size_restricted.gif]

A total of thirteen strikes invaded the heavens as both women blurred into invisibility, neither moving slow enough for the naked eye to follow nor comprehend. Every clash induced explosions of antipathetic light and darkness. The battle moved south. Then east. Then into the skies, creating erupting spheres of vaporizing water. Rocks shattered when the battle returned to the ground. Followed by deep scars crisscrossing one another in opposite directions. Yet not a single drop of blood stained the snowy landscape.

As reality devolved into a pastiche of colors impossible to differentiate from one another, Satsuki relentlessly pushed forward. Muramasa danced upon the wind, blocking and parrying the opposing blade, never gaining an advantage nor losing ground. She moved. She fought. And she struggled. And little more than inches from her bared teeth and scowling eyebrows desiring Nui Harime's destruction, Seamstress bobbed and weaving alongside its malevolent wielder, devolving into a pinkish-purple blur incapable of maintaining physical consistency.

And then a fourteenth and final exchange violently shattered the ground beneath Satsuki Kiryuin and Nui Harime's feet into rubble, physically forcing both women apart.

CLANG!!!

Without so much as a speck of dirt befouling her clothes, Seamstress clasped between fingers covered by stylish pink and white gloves, Nui's breath was visible despite having literally no reason or *need* to breathe, "You're really trying to piss me off, aren't you?"

For a moment, just barely long enough for someone like Satsuki to notice, her smile faltered. Because she was annoyed. Honestly, truly annoyed. And Satsuki knew it. But no matter how much Satsuki might've desired, she wasn't *nearly* annoyed enough to lash out, lose her temper or make stupid mistakes over something so gosh-*damn* trivial. Not in a thousand years and not for a pathetic pig in human clothing unable to accomplish anything in her miserable life.

"Then again - " that was why, with an expression reminiscent of a crouching tiger about to devour an antelope rather than a Keyblade Master, Nui spun clockwise on the spot, letting the irritation building within her heart vanish. It wasn't easy. Not as easy as she wanted. But it worked well enough to leave her happy and somewhat amused as she pivoted back to Satsuki, Seamstress clasped in both hands

and darkness causing her blonde hair to rustle in the wind, " - I have a Keyblade and you don't."

BOOM!!!

Satsuki moved before Nui Harime finished speaking.

As the concussive explosion from their clashing willpowers emanating across the mountain, blasting away snow and rock, Satsuki adjusted her grip. She tucked her shoulder inwards and utilized what minimal difference existed between her height and Nui Harime's to shift Muramasa around Seamstress, dragging the Keyblade towards the ground and creating yet another shockwave, "Are you under the impression I'm envious? You couldn't be further from the truth! That you think I'd desire such power speaks of the emptiness dwelling inside your heart!"

"Oops!"

Yanking her Keyblade backwards, Nui leapt out of Satsuki's immediate range. And then stared blocking. It wasn't easy against someone like Satsuki. But Satsuki wasn't Ryuko. Satsuki wasn't even Ragyo Kiryuin. And with remarkable cadence, she ducked beneath Muramasa, propped her boot against the blade and backflipped halfway across the peak before landing back where she'd originally been sitting, "You got me there, Satsuki! But, you know, if we keep dancing like this, you'll ~never~ find out why I wanted to talk to you!"

Yet Satsuki chose not to follow.

"Why did you send me that letter?" her voice bereft of disgust, Satsuki jostled Muramasa, dislodging the blade from ice and snow, "To gloat?"

"Oh, you're no fun..."

Seated behind Seamstress, the Keyblade stabbed into shattered ice and snow, Nui clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, legs idly swinging back and forth, "Maybe I ~am~ gloating, but that's not why I paid first-class shipping for overnight deliver. No, paid those Moogles premium so I could personally tell you that your long and tedious search is finally over."

"My search?"

Satsuki mentally repeated those two words, searching for the nefarious interpretation Nui Harime undoubtedly stitched into them, "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe the guy you've spent the last couple of months searching high and low for? The one who messed with Life Fibers," drawling out each syllable, Nui patiently waited until realization dawned upon Satsuki before delivering the finishing blow. All without her smile faltering so much as an inch, "Well, just between the two of us, let me just say he's no longer available to share the fruits of his research."

"Am I supposed to be impressed?"

Furrowed eyebrows summarized Satsuki's reaction to Nui Harime callously confessing to cold-blooded murder, "His research into Life Fibers was highly unethical, bordering on cruelty for cruelty's sake. He deserved nothing less than the fate you dealt him."

"Aww..."

Nui's smile faded into a disappointed frown, "Do you know how long it took me to hunt him down? It wasn't exactly easy, you know."

"I fail to see how that's *my* problem."

Allowing her disdain to percolate upon the wind, Satsuki turned her back to Nui Harime with a sharp pivot and proceeded down North Mountain. No matter *how* it looked, she wasn't leaving entirely by

choice. As much as she would have preferred maiming, if not killing, the Life Fiber monster who once pledged loyalty to Ragyo Kiryuin, she lacked the means to do so. For Nui Harime was right - without the Scissor Blades, attempting to bypass her regeneration would be an effort in futility. Perhaps, at one time, she could have utilized her false toenails. But they were gone, surgically removed when she'd originally laid down her sword.

"Leaving so soon?"

Yet she'd barely taken a handful of steps before an obnoxiously saccharine voice penetrated her soul, "And just as I was going to tell you all about his lab. His *secret* lab. Not the boring place you found underneath Hollow Bastion."

Crunch!

Revulsion bubbled in the pit of Satsuki's stomach as she stopped mid-stride, every instinct screaming to ignore Nui Harime's taunt yet something forcing her to answer, "You have ten seconds to explain yourself."

"You're giving *me* an ultimatum?"

Nui *experienced* unbound exhilaration at the hatred and animosity clinging to Satsuki's heart like a wooly blanket. It was tantalizingly spicy! An abhorrent mixture of light and darkness quite impossible to blend by hand. Yet utterly interesting! Cheeks rosy from the frigid conditions yet lips perfectly moistened, Nui leaned forward without moving anything other than what needed to be moved. Her head bobbed back and forth. Seamstress wiggled this way and that, methodically loosening the ice while her smile steadily widened. And then, drawn forth by Satsuki's unyielding tenacity and dead-eyed glare capable of curdling milk through sheer willpower, tauntingly commented, "Does that mean you need me to spell it out?"

"You can spell it out all you want, Nui Harime - "

Satsuki's right eye twitched when strands of black hair incidentally brushed against her face, blown out of place by the wind sweeping through the somber mountains. She was a tiger confronting a leopard. A predator facing another for the right to survive. And thus, glancing over her shoulder, cold steel darkening, she expressed that animosity without surrendering so much as an inch of pride nor ground, " - I have no reason to take anything you say at face value."

The midwinter sunlight briefly dimmed alongside Nui's smile, "That's rude, Satsuki, you know better than anyone I ~don't~ lie."

"But you egregiously stretch the truth until it cannot be distinguished from lies," Satsuki countered without acknowledging the growing darkness enveloping the monster sharing but superficial genetic traits with herself and Ryuko.

"You got me there," seeing no reason to deny the truth, Nui stopped bobbing her head, "But this time I'm ~not~ exaggerating, pinky swear!"

An uneasy feeling clung to the hyperborean temperament blanketing the outer edges of the world as Satsuki forced herself to turn around, penetrating eyes meticulously memorizing Nui Harime's disarmingly relaxed posture. She searched for it. The reason Nui Harime *mailed* a letter to her personal address, risking the heavens themselves as well as Ryuko crashing upon her head. Yet she saw nothing - *found nothing* - but an honest desire to talk about something, which unnerved her far more than anything. Because she *knew* Nui Harime was lying.

"What do you *want*?"

When she spoke, Satsuki did so with the tone one dedicated to a rather dangerous creature, "It cannot possible be out of the goodness of your blackened heart."

"À peine!"

Balking at the ridiculous suggestion, Nui stood up, snow crunching beneath her boots as she landed behind Satsuki, "But you sure do have a sense of humor, Satsuki."

"Oh, is that so?"

Apart from the momentary uptick in her heart rate, Satsuki refused to acknowledge Nui Harime invading her personal space, "It's not like you to speak so indirectly. Is there something you're hiding from me? Perhaps Ansem the Wise's apprentice proved more difficult to defeat than expected. Or perhaps he created a new anti-Life Fiber weapon far superior to the Rending Scissors. Or he's made something so incredible not even you, someone once priding herself as the greatest couturier in the world... pulled off..."

With every additional accusation thrown into the wind, it grew beyond a merely phantasmal presence lurking in the darkest corners of reality.

A darkness far greater than Xehanort's Heartless or Maleficent's.

But Satsuki paid no attention to the ephemeral whims of a rabid beast, "... a Kamui, perhaps?"

Once she finished, Satsuki resisted the urge to scoff at the ridiculous of her own words. Ansem the Wise's fallen apprentice had been quite intelligent. Perhaps a genius. His research on Life Fibers, while inferior to anything produced by Honnouji's Sewing Club and immense unethical, was groundbreaking if one considered he started from scratch. But the evolution from weaving Life Fibers into normal clothing to creating a Kamui far surpassed an infant learning how to stand upon its legs and humanity breaking the atmosphere using solid-state propulsion.

And judging by the tittering pressing against her ears, Nui Harime found her accusation as preposterous as she did.

"Hmm... nope, it's nothing so grandiose," Nui smirked, back to her old, lovable self, ignoring Satsuki's insult as easily as one put on a new pair of underwear, "But I'm certain you'll find it quite interesting. Once you go take a look for yourself, that is."

Something soft yet hard clattered to the ground.

Satsuki's eyes snapped downwards, focusing upon the navigation gummi block stuck in the snow.

The wind howled.

The cold sun sent shivers racing down her spine.

Utterly alone on the North Mountain when Nui Harime took full advantage of her momentary lapse in focus to retreat into the darkness like the coward she truly was, Satsuki callously swept Muramasa through the air before sheathing the blade at her waist. Breathing through parted lips, each exhalation producing an opaque mist of vapor in front of her eyes, she bent down. One knee pressed into the snow as she cautiously picked up the navigation gummi. She turned it over in her hand, searching for anything unusual. Her expression darkened into a familiar glower. She clenched her fingers into a fist.

And without another word, Satsuki began the long trek down the somber mountain, each step quieter than the last.

Chapter 21.5 [Day 255 - Part I]

[img: <https://i.imgur.com/nZrwuu5.png>]

"Congratulations. You have the honor of being my first offering to Junketsu."

"Junketsu? Purity? I didn't know there was anything pure about ya."

"Allow me to show you."

Her head hurt.

And it took everything not to fall to her knees.

She was remembering more now. More about her past and who she used to be. Stumbling forward, fingers woven through her hair, she struggled to hold onto the memories already fading. Something *snapped*, as if a thread was pulled taut. Her headache worsened. And then, just like that, she remembered *everything*. No names. But faces and places beyond her wildest dreams. It was a strange world. A place she couldn't fathom. Yet try as she might, the voices and sounds were muted. And the colors were washed out, almost like was being forced to watch through glass. Yet one person stood prominent in what remained of the distorted memory.

A girl a few years old than herself with some of the thickest eyebrows she'd ever seen.

"Who was she?"

Besieged by emotions and memories, Xion forcibly bit her lip, the taste of blood briefly clinging to her tongue. Her cheeks twitched. Her fingers opened and closed. And a blush - faint yet noticeable - quickly spread across her face at what the girl from her memory had

been wearing. Not only proudly, but without any embarrassment, "And what was she -"

Her concentration shattered when darkness erupted from the floor.

Followed by Axel appearing in the middle of the room.

As the Nobody strutted out of the darkness, which sealed itself shut the moment the last bang of red hair bounced free, the vestigial embarrassment forming into a prominent blush replaced by anxiety. Her headache vanished yet her chest painfully clenched, leaving her gasping for breath while darkness crept along her vision. Almost defensively, she backpedaled towards Castle Oblivion's still open front doors, Senketsu one sudden movement from materializing. What was going on? Why was he here? She'd waited until everybody was away on missions before coming to Castle Oblivion! She'd double-checked the daily assignments! Did this mean Xemnas knew she was the one who broke into the computer, not Demyx?

"Well - that takes care of that..."

Announcing his boredom with an overcompensating yawn, Axel slowly worked the kink out his shoulder, "Why are you here, Xion?"

Stabbing a hand into his pocket while rubbing his neck with the other, he started walking towards Xion. Not quickly. Not slowly. But at a pace that didn't exactly inspire confidence or danger. Clean-up duty was never his forte. Nor was greasing Saïx's path to the top of the ladder. But some things were simply necessary. Which was why instead of thinking about all the 'comrades' he'd directly or indirectly cut down to move their plan forward, Axel focused on his footsteps. Fifteen. Then twenty. And finally, twenty-five, all without Xion answering his question.

He hoped she'd come clean, if not for his sake, then hers.

But when he finally reached Xion without so much as an explanation, Axel felt the metaphorical knot around his hands become that much

tighter.

"Well?" deciding to give Xion one last chance to explain herself, he softened his tone, "You better have a good explanation - or any explanation because if Saïx believes I can't handle clean up duty, it's going to be an awkward walk home."

"How did you find me?"

"Find you?"

Axel grumbled, more confused than anything. There was *something* wrong with Xion's question. He couldn't quite put his finger on it. Maybe it was her abruptness. But reaching out and placing his hand on her shoulder, he pushed those unnecessary thoughts aside, "What are you talking about? Find you? I didn't even know you were coming."

"That's not what I mean," Xion tried pulling away from Axel, yet found herself unwilling, "When I first woke up... back in my room... you said you saved me from the Heartless on some distant world," she could almost see someone's face. It was difficult. Almost impossible. But when she reached deep inside her chest, she felt as if someone was waiting for her. Hands trembling, Xion shook her head, "But whenever I ask someone about that world, they tell me it's not healthy to dwell upon painful memories. But how can they be memories if I don't even remember?"

"Xion - "

She tried pulling away for a second time only to feel Axel's fingers slip off her shoulder of their own accord, "If you really saved me... why do I remember leaving this place with Saïx?"

"It's complicated."

"Complicated?" unable to understand what he could possibly be suggesting, Xion balked, "How can it be complicated?"

"Because things aren't so cut and dry."

Alone with nothing but silence pressing against his ears, Axel didn't quite know what to tell Xion. A lie? The truth? Or something between? Things were spiraling out of control, leaving him as the only one standing in the path of an oncoming train. If he told her the truth, she might go off the deep end. If he came up with some half-baked excuse, there was a chance Xion might calm down and come back to the castle. Or she'd figure out his was lying to her, defect from the Organization and make everything worse. What could he do? He couldn't say nothing. And he couldn't tell the truth.

Not the whole truth, at the very least.

"When we - I - found you, you weren't in the best shape. Xemnas said it had to do with how you lost your heart. A traumatic experience or a painful memory your mind tried locking away," with Xion begging for answers, he stepped backwards, one hand propped on his waist and the other lost inside his hair, "You slept for an entire week. And when you showed no signs of waking up, Xemnas ordered Saïx to bring you to Castle Oblivion."

"... why?"

"He must've hoped Vexen knew how to help you," Axel conceded in a whisper before attempting a smile, "Which he did! I'm not sure how, but a couple of days later, you finally woke up! You couldn't remember anything, not even your name or where you came from. Vexen thought you needed to rest, but Saïx decided to escort you back to your room. As for your memories? Maybe it's a good thing you can't remember anything. There are some things a lot of people would pay almost anything to forget."

"Would you say that if you couldn't remember anything?"

The stifling silence she earned in exchange spoke louder than words, leaving her unable to do anything but realize Axel was still hiding something from her, "That's what I thought."

She'd barely stepped around Axel before he grabbed her arm.

"What do you expect to find here, Xion? You said it yourself - you don't remember anything before Saix brought you back to the castle," a winced forced itself out of Axel's throat. If he hadn't already known about her inhuman strength, he probably would have dislocated a finger or two. Even so, it felt like he'd grabbed a gummi ship about to take off. But luckily enough, Xion wasn't as strong as Ryuko Matoi, which was the only stopping her from escaping deeper into Castle Oblivion.

"Who's Ryuko?"

"Who knows," keeping a firm grip on Xion's arm, the flurry of dancing flames scoffed, "Now let's go home before - "

"No."

As her rejection slammed into Axel like a rampaging chocobo, confidence swelled within the depths of her soul. She felt strangely invigorated. Cocky. Arrogant. Like there was nothing that could stop her from finding the truth. Before he could process anything, Xion yanked her arm out of Axel's grip, momentarily leaving him off-balance as she desperately sprinted towards the inner sanctum, "If you won't tell me, then I'll just have to find out for myself!"

But Axel wasn't so easily dissuaded.

They spun into existence, manifesting from fire itself before his fingers clenched around their cross-shaped handles, dissipating the residual flames in a silent explosion overwhelmed by the unraveling situation. Something he'd desperately hoped to avoid. Lurching forward with the sound of fluttering cloth and deaf curses as his only company, Axel darted through fire and flames, crossing Castle Oblivion's entrance hall before Xion managed to reach the halfway point. A single sidestep brought him towards the door, placing him between where she wanted to go and where she was, chakrams at

the ready and mouth pursing at the crimson light twinkling around Xion's hand.

"Are you crazy!?"

Leaning around Xion's Keyblade, he lurched backwards, avoiding the haphazard swings, "You can't just go around disobeying orders! If Xemnas found out - "

"He'll what? Turn me into a Dusk?"

Bolstered by confidence she couldn't understand and gasping from desperation and confusion, Xion stared at the floor, unable to look Axel in the eye, "Is that what you're suggesting?"

Axel couldn't say anything.

Not to that.

Because Xion was wrong.

Only for the wrong reasons.

"You want me to do what?"

"You are to clear out the facilities in Castle Oblivion," in the shadows, hidden from prying eyes, Saïx's brow furrowed into a semblance of a frown, "Leave nothing behind for Ryuko Matoi and her allies to discover. And you are to retrieve the weapon Vexen developed before his demise."

"A weapon?" he repeated.

"Yes," without raising his voice, Saïx added, "One developed exclusively to destroy Life Fibers."

*"You think some mysterious weapon Vexen cooked up in the dead of night's gonna work against Ryuko?" shaking his head, he forced out a hollow laugh, "Or **her**?"*

"It's not for either of them," Saïx looked down the corridor, ensuring they were alone.

"Wait - it's not for..." he almost wasn't certain he'd actually said anything. Not until he'd spun around, "Hold on! You're not seriously planning on using it on Xion, are you?"

"Don't tell me you've actually grown attached to it?"

"No! It's just - " he thought quickly, searching for something to say, " - Xion's proved herself loyal! That's gotta count for something!"

*"You know what Ryuko Matoi can do. You've **seen** what Nui Harime is capable of," Saïx's scoff stopped him cold, "Are you willing to risk everything we've worked to achieve on some make-believe friendship with a creature liable to stab you in the back?"*

"No! It's just - " struggling, he fumbled for another excuse, " - shouldn't we wait for proof before doing anything?"

*"Fair enough," conceding the point, Saïx turned aside, walking around him without looking over his shoulder, "But if Xion **does** lose control, who is she liable to emulate? Ryuko Matoi? Or Nui Harime?"*

"It doesn't matter what I think."

The dull drone of silence pressed against Axel's consciousness as what little flames lingered around his fingers extinguished themselves. Chewing on the inside of his cheek, he forcibly turned away, the last several hours returning in a blur of thought. He didn't know how long he'd searched. A few hours. Maybe most of the day. But he'd found it - a weapon designed specifically to destroy Xion. Or anything made from Life Fibers. Like Ryuko Matoi. Or Nui Harime. A conflicted grimace worked its way onto his face as, for a brief moment, the strange device inside his pocket felt heavier.

He steadily lowered his arms, chakram bouncing between numbed fingers.

"All that matters is what Xemnas thinks," repeating those same words inside his head, Axel couldn't understand *why* he felt so... bothered... by everything. Xemnas was the one holding all the cards. If the emotionless bastard decided Xion was a liability, there wasn't anything he else could do to stop him. With little fanfare, his chakram vanished, breaking apart into motes of darkened flames, "If he realizes you disobeyed orders, he won't settle on punishing you. Not anymore. You'd be a threat to him. He wouldn't stop until you're destroyed!"

The honest threat hurt worse than any Heartless.

Dismissing Senketsu without really understanding why, Xion pulled the strings of her hood, "It's because I'm just like her, right?"

"What?"

Axel seemed confused, almost surprised, by the accusation. It hit him hard, striking at something inside his chest that seemed to painfully squeeze the longer he ignored Xion's quiet confession, "No, of course not! How can you even think you're anything like her?"

"You knew... all this time, you knew about my past, didn't you?" a tear shimmered in Xion's eye before anger and frustration overwhelmed sadness, "Was pretending to be my friend nothing more than a game to you? Was Roxas - "

"NO!"

He shouted at the top of his lungs, interrupting Xion before she could finish. His voice echoed throughout the otherwise empty foyer, reaching the upper levels as his heart raced and mouth felt like it was filled with cotton. Axel didn't know how long he stood there, unable to disprove Xion's accusation but unwilling to lie to her about it. Something changed. Maybe it was him. Maybe he'd grown sick and tired of watching Xion day and night like she was some experiment instead of someone with their own memories and feelings. A person totally different from Ryuko Matoi.

"Xion... I... whatever you might think... Roxas and me, we're your friends," stumbling over his words, Axel knelt in front of Xion, "Now, let's go home. I'm sure Roxas is worried - "

Clack!

"Am I interrupting something?"

Last edited: Sep 10, 2020

Chapter 21.6 [Day 255 - Part II]

[img: <https://i.imgur.com/nZrwuu5.png>]

The Realm Between was a curious place.

It was not truly a separate plane, although common misconception caused naïve minds to believe so. One could easily travel from the realm of light into the Realm Between without knowing. On the contrary, it functioned more along the lines of a metaphysical conundrum, simultaneously existing and not existing. If one considered the realms of light and darkness as oil and water inside a bowl, the Realm Between was the chaotic layer between them - constantly changing and never possessing the same form twice. Yet that was only a childish interpretation. As Merlin had once eloquently explained to her - the Realm Between behaved much like a multidimensional origami crane. You could touch it, observe it and describe its appearance but attempting to delve its secrets would only leave you with a migraine and more questions than answers.

An apt metaphor.

Clack!

The drop from the *Bahamut's* cockpit to the ground was less than two meters. Her boots touched simultaneously, kicking up fleeting clouds of purplish dust long resigned to a fate of nothingness. Alone on the winding and twisting road barely twice her gummi ship's wingspan, Satsuki Kiryuin observed the structure bearing more resemblance to an Escher painting than a former seat of Keyblade Masters with discerning eyes. The castle stood solitary on a floating landmass above an endless chasm of darkness. Towers and citadels jutted at odd and random angles. Warm orange light radiated from rooms that had never been occupied. Spiraling clouds obscured moonlight, yet sufficient alabaster illuminated the citadel.

One hand resting against her gummi ship, Satsuki repeated the question she'd asked herself upon realizing *where* Nui Harime sent her, "How did she know?"

If the Grand Couturier possessed a single constituent quality, it was her insistence upon speaking the truth. It had been far too long since her youth feigning loyalty to Life Fibers and Ragyo Kiryuin, but even so, she couldn't recall an instance of Nui Harime lying. Which only served to make her ulterior motives all the more suspicious. For one could speak truthfully yet lead to false conclusions through careful accentuation, enunciation and deliberate omission. In this case, offering directions to Ansem the Wise's former apprentice's second and far more hidden Life Fiber research laboratory yet purposely failing to mention it laid somewhere upon the Land of Departure.

But that didn't explain the thrumming inside her chest.

It couldn't be the darkness clinging the world. For while exceptionally thick and heavy, it was not overly suffocating nor suppressed the light. A coldness clung to the ephemeral night yet failed to elicit so much as a shiver. The air smelled of mildew and rotten condensation. A soft, almost unnoticeable breeze whispered false promises only to betray itself the next moment. No, this was something far more profound... simultaneously intimate and indefinite in ways impossible to adequately describe.

She could *feel* it.

Something within the castle beckoned to her heart.

"Unlikely."

Yet she, Satsuki Kiryuin, refused to act upon *only* emotions. Not when something far more important took precedence. Her eyes narrowing, she searched for any disturbance, seeking eddies and flows in the darkness. Yet nothing overt drew her attention. Still, the tranquility concealed something. But what, was the question, as peculiar nostalgia twisted into minor annoyance at the knowledge

Nui Harime had known about the Land of Departure *after* the world vanished. Taking a deep breath, relieving herself of the tension percolating through her heart and soul, she reached into her pocket, withdrawing a Gummiphone while her other hand moved towards Muramasa.

Despite the cold, her breath wasn't visible.

She flicked a speck of dust off her sleeve.

Ring! Ring!

After the tenth ring, she watched the darkened screen burst into a menagerie of colors, "Ryuko, I - "

" - HOLD ON A GODDAMN SECOND!!!"

SCREECH!!!

BOOM!!!

Surprised by the overly aggressive response, Satsuki instinctively moved the Gummiphone away from her face. She blinked. Her mouth opened. And then, a moment later, she brought it closer. Ryuko's hand over the screen made it impossible to see anything, but she could *hear* everything. And yet that explained almost nothing. Gunfire erupted through her phone's speakers alongside metallic screeching, a cacophonous ambience that failed to send shivers down her spine but provoked mild disgust. She could hear magic as well as the familiar and unmistakable sound of Threadcutter slicing through metal, darkness and whatever stood between itself and Ryuko's objective.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Ryuko's fingers moved, leading to far more questions than answers when Satsuki saw heavily armored soldiers bearing futuristic weapons fighting robotic bugs and what looked like mechanical Heartless in the background.

And when the image blurred, undoubtedly the result of Ryuko running faster than the motion tracking could possibly compensate for, she wondered why her sister picked up before finishing whatever she was doing.

SCREECH!!!

BOOM!!!

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU MORONS WAITING FOR? AN INVITATION!?"

SCREEEECCCHH!!!

"You heard the lady," a voice distinctively not Ryuko's pierced through the gunfire and explosions rocketing the alien battlefield, "Now quit sitting on your butts and get moving! Alpha squad! You're with me and the newbie! Bravo team! Suppressing fire on these coordinates! Charlie group! Cover General Ryuko while she takes out those new cy-bugs. Since she knows what we're dealing with, follow her orders as if they were mine! Now, let's go kill some cy-bugs!"

"GO! GO! GO! GO! GO! GO! GO!"

BOOOOOM!!!

Satsuki stared at her Gummiphone, flashes of green, blue and red light illuminating her bewildered face. The gunfire was nearly deafening. There was fire. A lot of fire. Explosions left and right. Cy-

bugs firing green lasers at Ryuko. Those same cy-bugs disintegrating into green light and scrap metal when Ryuko counterattacked. Perhaps it was fascination or curiosity or some mixture of emotions. Whatever the reason, having given up attempting to reach her sister while she was preoccupied, Satsuki decided to stand back and simply wait.

How long?

She did not know.

But when the fighting settled into silence... when Ryuko's Gummiphone, held upside-down, flipped right-side-up... Satsuki nonchalantly enquired, "Have I caught you at a bad time?"

"Not really, no."

A cy-bug flew close to Ryuko. Or rather, a swarm numbering in the dozens, their wings beating fast enough to devolve into blurs. The metallic horde of voracious machines swarmed the glowing pylon she'd chosen out of many lining the bridge as her vantage point. Intent on devouring her, they collided mandible-first into the formerly invisible barrier, hitting one after another until simultaneously bursting into flames, *"Just dealin' with some Heartless. And a termite infestation. Giant... vicious... swarming... termites... that turn into whatever they eat. Eugh, there goes my appetite."*

Satsuki pondered the reasons someone would create a swarm of self-evolving insectoid machines, "General Ryuko?"

"That's right," Ryuko responded with an obnoxious grin, *"It took a while, but I finally outrank your sorry - "*

BOOM!!!

SCREEEECCCHH!!!

Ryuko flinched. Or perhaps, it was the world itself which trembled. The cy-bugs swarming in the background momentarily dispersed into individual groups before reconstituting. Soldiers shouted orders over the cacophony. And seeming done with everything on the battle-scarred world, Ryuko's head tilted forward, exasperation evident in her voice, *"Why the hell did you call me, Satsuki?"*

Rather than acknowledge the insinuation, Satsuki focused on something more important than Ryuko's delusions of grandeur, "I've found the Land of Departure."

"What? Seriously?" fumbling her phone out of shock, Ryuko quickly caught the device, Threadcutter dissolving into an ocean of red stars and light, *"How!?"*

"How do you think?" it felt redundant explaining what her sister should have already known, but in the interest of time, Satsuki nevertheless answered as concisely as possible, "The Navi-Gumi Nui Harime conveniently left behind on Arendelle."

"Ugh, of course."

Ryuko couldn't tell what sucked more - that someone, somehow, found a way to hide the Land of Departure from Merlin and Yen Sid's snooping eyes for six years or Nui Harime sent a letter to Satsuki through Mognet Central. Both were equally terrible, yet the fact that Nui knew Satsuki's address raised several questions she'd rather not think about, *"Well, did you find anything?"*

"Not yet," surrounded by gunfire and cy-bugs, Ryuko's hopes dashed themselves against the bridge when her sister shook her head, "Furthermore, if it's anything like the laboratory underneath Hollow Bastion, we must assume it'll be rather difficult to find, let alone access Even's data logs and files."

"How do we know she's telling the truth?"

"We don't," the noticeable tensing of Satsuki Kiryuin's voice confirmed how *little* she took Nui Harime's word at face value, "But Life Fibers are far too dangerous. And if Even managed to enrage someone as arrogant as Nui Harime, we cannot take any chances. Whatever he made, it must be destroyed at any cost, before the Grand Couturier gets her hands on it."

"You don't need to tell me twice."

As swarms of cy-bugs shimmered throughout the steel grey skies covering the world, Ryuko groaned, *"Alright, give me ten hours. Maybe a day. Once I take out the Heartless in charge of these bugs, I'll head over to Alexandria, yank Beatrix out of retirement and we'll beat the shit out of Nui Harime."*

Satsuki considered the offer.

"I can handle whatever Nui Harime has planned," and then politely declined the generous offer without granting her sister time to argue, "Stopping those Heartless takes priority."

"You know it's a trap, right?"

"Perhaps," while she graciously admitted Ryuko made a good point, something nagged on her heart, "Or perhaps that's what Nui wants us to believe."

"Huh?"

"Place yourself in her shoes," a derisive, almost contemptuous in its depth and emotion, snort reached across the worlds as Satsuki's gaze hardened to familiar ambivalence, "You've successfully tracked down the only person foolish enough to research Life Fibers. But you don't know what he's created. Perhaps he's manufactured clothing. Perhaps he's discovered a means of replicating the Scissor Blades. You don't know. Which is why you planned on interrogating him. Yet he refused to concede, bruising your pride and leaving you with

nothing for your efforts. If you were in Nui Harime's position, what would you do?"

"Tch, me? I'd probably get someone else to - "

Ryuko froze halfway through explaining how she'd blackmail, threaten or force someone else to help break into Even's lab when the dots finally connected, *"Hold on! This sounds just like - "*

"Then you understand."

"God damn it," across the universe, surrounded by soldiers and cy-bugs, Ryuko pinched the bridge of her nose. Out of all the... no, she refused to fall to Nui Harime's level, even if that meant brushing something like this off, *"Alright, fine. Do whatever you want. Not like anything I say will change your mind. Just be careful. We don't know what she's -"*

SCREEEEEEEECH!!!

" - I'll call you back. I've got some exterminating to do," with a half-lazy wave, Ryuko leapt onto her feet, the *thud* of her boots against metal echoing through the Gummiphone's speakers, *"Have fun kicking Nui Harime's ass. Oh, and punch her in the face for me, will ya?"*

And without so much as a goodbye, Ryuko pressed a button on her phone, hanging up right before Satsuki could say anything.

But not quickly enough to hide the telltale explosion of vermilion light and twinkling stars accompanying Threadcutter's manifestation into reality. Nor conceal the enormous Heartless hovering above the central tower across the bridge, insectoid in appearance with innumerable limbs, wings and electronic yellow eyes. All while enveloped in a miasma of nauseatingly thick darkness. Something Satsuki mentally noted before pocketing the Gummiphone, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and marching towards the mismatched towers awaiting down the perilous road.

It did not take long to reach the castle.

Contrary to her expectations, neither Heartless nor Nui Harime appeared during the relatively short journey.

"Thirteen floors and twelve basements."

Reciting what little information Beatrix and Mickey's forays into the transfigured citadel managed to gleam before its disappearance, Satsuki casually rested her palm atop Muramasa's pommel while reaching out with her other hand. Right before her fingers brushed against the egress, she reflexively drew her arm backwards, thought twice about her current course of action, then pressed her hand upon the surface. Nothing about the world had changed. Everything was the same as when she'd investigated the castle herself. Yet *something* inside was different.

That much was certain.

Within the unmappable floors and stairs leading back to the same room, something important beckoned her heart.

"But what?"

Muttering the question more to herself than in the hopes of receiving an answer, Satsuki shook her head, "I suppose I'll find out soon - "

"If he realizes you disobeyed orders, he won't settle on punishing you. Not anymore. You'd be a threat to him. He wouldn't stop until you're destroyed!"

"It's because I'm just like her, right?"

She stopped short.

Someone was already inside.

No, two people.

Neither of whom sounded like Nui Harime.

*"Was pretending to be my friend nothing more than a game to you?
Was Roxas - "*

"NO!"

"An argument?"

Muttering underneath her breath, Satsuki's expression settled into perturbed ambivalence in response to the unexpected revelation as she stepped away from the doors, Muramasa's scabbard bouncing against her thigh. She should have expected as much. If the Grand Couturier somehow knew of the Land of Departure's coordinates, it stood to reason whomever successfully veiled the world from Merlin and Yen Sid did as well. Were they cooperating? Doubtful. Nui Harime was many things, but her misanthropism precluded following anyone other than Ragyo Kiryuin. If that was the case, *how* did Nui Harime come to learn about the Land of Departure?

Thoughts and questions swirled inside her mind.

Yet brushing them aside for the moment, she reached out and pressed a hand against one of the doors, pushing it open just enough to look inside.

She had been correct.

There *were* two people inside the foyer.

Both of whom wore the same darkness-warding clothing as the man she'd confronted in Hollow Bastion *and* Ryuko brought back from the Realm of Darkness.

"Nobodies?"

Through the crack between the doors, her eyes narrowed. Nobodies - empty vessels whose Hearts had been stolen by Heartless yet whose willpower allowed their souls to continue animating their body.

Beings that do not truly exist. A laughable notion. Yen Sid's flowery description might have been useful, but without prompting, Satsuki dismissed the sorcerer's warning. She couldn't care less about meaningless philosophical arguments concerning existence and one's Heart. She was far more focused upon the dangers posed by people whom needn't worry about darkness. And whom possessed a wide variety of strange and esoteric abilities.

But were *these* people Nobodies?

She wasn't sure.

One stood as tall as Steiner with fiery red hair.

The other was shorter, their visage concealed by their hood.

Ryuko claimed Nobodies reeked of darkness, yet unlike her sister, she couldn't 'smell' darkness.

But it was the latter's voice... their tones and inflection... the way they enunciated certain syllables... which caused her heart to skip a beat.

It was impossible.

And yet...

... she had to know.

"Xion... I... whatever you might think... Roxas and me, we're your friends. Now, let's go home. I'm sure Roxas is worried - "

Clack!

Pushing open the doors, she walked into the castle, her heeled boots clacking against marble, "Am I interrupting something?"

Author's Note

If anyone wants, they can write omake (canon or not, who knows) about Ryuko's visit to Game Station Central. However, there are a few rules - it takes place before Wreck It Ralph (but after Hero's Duty was plugged in), Ralph doesn't meet Ryuko and she doesn't meet King Candy.

Last edited: Sep 16, 2020

Chapter 21.6 [Day 255 - Part III]

[img: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/kill-la-kill/images/6/68/Kill-3-24-satsuki-slash.jpg/revision/latest?cb=20150413042105>]

"Am I interrupting something?"

Satsuki's voice didn't rise above normal social convention as she strutted through the open entrance, heels *snap-clacking* and steel blue eyes trained on the strangers whose argument immediately stumbled. The Land of Departure truly hadn't changed. And yet something important was different. There was a soft breeze reminiscent of fresh flowers. An ephemeral scent harkening to pleasant memories. And when she stopped, one final *clack* against white marble reaching the furthest corners of the room, breaking through shadows yet leaving the tension intact, she caught a glimpse of something.

As if she was merely a bystander, a ghostly image of a teenager holding an unknown Keyblade walked through her body.

She could not remember him.

She could not recall ever seeing anyone like him.

Yet Satsuki felt as if they'd met before.

None of this reached Satsuki's eyes, confessing nothing to those standing opposite her. The scowl adorning her face merely tightened as the illusion disappeared, leaving her searching for answers. Not from the taller figure on the verge of doing something stupid, but the girl next to him, whose existence intrigued her heart, "Perhaps I've caught you at a bad time."

THUNK!!!

An eyebrow arched, more out of irritation than insult. In the right hands, chakram were deadly. And the man making the egregious mistake of launching an unprovoked attack wasn't half-bad. His technique and form everything but perfect. Yet as the weapons left his fingers, spinning across the room fast enough to split apart air, Satsuki refused to accommodate his uncouth demands. She could have unsheathed Muramasa and deflected the projectiles in a single movement. Instead, she removed the cursed blade - scabbard and all - off her waist and leaned *between* the chakram.

"Was that supposed to - "

FWOOSH!!!

Fire erupted from the floor before the question left her tongue. She could not see anything. She could not sense nor hear anything. The air teetered on the verge of self-igniting from the heat. Her lips grew parched. In the wake of such blinding light, her eyes narrowed. Sweat beaded on her face, evaporating almost as soon as it appeared.

One by one, her fingers curled around Muramasa, thumb settling against the tsuba while her other hand grasped its scabbard, I suppose there's no other solution."

Beyond the fire and flames, Axel did everything but curse.

"Ain't this terrific," it had been a one in a million chance. Not so much a plan as a cobbled-together strategy from his first encounter with Nui Harime, when the crazy bitch had focused on Larxene just a few floors above them. Yet this time it seemed to work, "As if today couldn't possibly get any worse."

Oh, it could have been worse.

A thousand times worse.

But on a scale of one to ten, an eleven wasn't much better than a twelve. Sure, Satsuki didn't have a Keyblade. Or Life Fibers, which meant she was relatively normal. Not that 'normal' meant anything about someone like Satsuki Kiryuin.

"Alright - time to go!" darkness bubbled behind him, purple and black miasma reminiscent of death forming into something opaque yet translucent. Once they stepped through the portal, they'd be home free. Not even someone crazy powerful like Satsuki Kiryuin, who could slice through lightning, could follow them. Xion would be safe. Maybe in some trouble for this stunt, but in *less* trouble than sticking around in Castle Oblivion for whatever Ryuko's sister had planned, "Come on, Xion!"

When he didn't hear anything, already halfway to the portal, Axel turned around.

At some point, Xion had fallen to her knees, eyes blank and mouth agape.

"XION!!!"

Running back towards her, Axel shook Xion's shoulders, hoping some flicker of consciousness returned to her eyes, "Come on, Xion! Snap out of - "

A shockwave of azure light crossed the room, missing the flurry of dancing flames by scant inches before impacting the writhing darkness behind him, shattering the unstable corridor into decaying shadows and inadvertently knocking down Xion's hood.

Satsuki held Muramasa with the temerity only one whom spent years atoning for her mother's heinous misdeeds could attest. The *lurch* of reality filled the emptiness pressing harshly upon her thoughts. Yet when she spoke, deliberately sauntering through the lingering flames clinging to existence with undeserved stubbornness, extinguishing themselves at a rate completely unacceptable, her voice resonated

with clear authority. There was no anger. Nor frustration. She did not childish scream or lose her temper or convey anything more than the barest traces of annoyance, "So - this was her game."

Emotion didn't blind her heart.

Yet that did not mean she *wasn't* angry.

Satsuki couldn't remember the last time she'd experienced such an overwhelming deluge of emotions. A storm bubbled inside her chest. Her heart was aflame. Her self-control stood on the verge of shattered. But if Nui Harime believed she was callous and short-sighted enough to place the sins of the father upon the child's shoulders, she truly understood nothing outside her remarkably myopic point of view, "Your name is Xion, is it not?"

Her question, far more than Axel's attempts, snapped Xion's heart from its downward spiral, "W-Who are you?"

Satsuki felt her heart clenching at the voice remarkably similar to Ryuko's. Yet no matter how much she resembled her sister, azure eyes possessing unmistakable spoke-like patterns around the irises, feathery navy-blue hair contaminated by bright crimson alongside a bang sweeping across their forehead and a face impossible to forget, Xion was not Ryuko. They were separate individuals. It took effort dousing the emotions roiling inside her heart, but at Xion's confusion and bewilderment, Satsuki forced herself to focus on the truly important matters.

Unfortunately, the pyromaniac had other ideas.

As soon as he appeared between herself and Xion, bone-charring flames sweeping alongside the chakram clenched within his fingers, she leapt backwards across the room. Each step was punctuated by another outburst of fire. Every *snap-clack* of eroded plastic against

white marble forced her further and further away from Xion until her back was nearly pressed against the front doors.

"Geez, I'm *awfully* sorry about the rude introduction..."

Burying his nervousness, Axel waited until Satsuki Kiryuin was as far away as possible before smirking, "... but I'm afraid I can't let you take Xion."

This was batshit crazy.

Him, fighting a monster like Satsuki Kiryuin?

Man, this day kept getting worse.

"The name's Axel," aware he was not only outclassed, but outclassed by someone who could give Xemnas a hard time, he tapped his forehead, drawing out the motion if only to stall long enough to think of a better plan than throwing everything at Satsuki Kiryuin and hoping for the best, "Got that memorized?"

Focusing not on the supernatural arsonist but Xion behind him, a noticeable scowl marred Satsuki's already frustrated expression as Muramasa devoured ambient light foolish enough to touch its obsidian blade, "Is that a threat or are you merely introducing yourself?"

"How about both?"

Conceding the point, mostly because he still need time to come up with an actual plan *and* because Satsuki was one hundred percent right on the money, Axel smirked, one chakram bouncing against his shoulder while spinning the other around his fingers. He'd never seen it, not with his own eyes, but there truly was a backdrop of light clinging to Satsuki Kiryuin's heart. And it went swimmingly with her detached demeanor, "Man, and here I thought *we* were heartless."

In response to Axel's confession, Satsuki latched onto his specific choice of words, "You're a Nobody."

Axel blinked.

"Oops, me and my big mouth," berating himself for spilling classified information to one of the worst people imaginable, Axel propped his hands on his waist, wistfully shook his head and groaned from the back of his throat, "Well, since you've figured everything out, guess there isn't any other choice but to turn up the [HEAT!!!](#)"

With a swipe of his arm, hellfire enveloped the foyer.

Flames exploded out of the ground between himself and Xion, protecting her from the battle to come.

Her back pressed against Castle Oblivion's front doors and scorching wind buffeting her face, Satsuki watched the approaching wall of flames with discerning eyes. As the temperature quickly surmounted water's boiling point, evaporating every drop of moisture and leaving her gasping in heat unavailable outside deserts, she maneuvered Muramasa until the cursed blade laid pressed between its scabbard and her hip. She shifted her left foot backwards three inches, twisted her waist and adjusting her stance. Another heartbeat passed with the wall of flames less than five meters from charring the flesh from her bones.

But at the opportune moment, faster than humanly possible, she *swung* Muramasa.

Then swung *twenty* more times.

In the blink of an eye, her arm devolved into a blur, slicing apart the roiling flames until nothing remained but fading embers.

"Not bad..." whistling between his teeth, Axel tossed a chakram into the air, caught it between his fingers and feigned disappointment for an entirely different reason than front-row seats to someone slicing

through one of his best techniques, "... not bad at all, but that's still not good enough to beat me."

"Is that everything?"

Aiming her blade at the Nobody possessing more arrogance than common sense, Satsuki clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, "Because it's not enough to beat me."

"Gotta say, that's one hell of a bluff," Axel scoffed, more out of reflex than anything.

"Who's saying I'm bluffing?" Satsuki retorted.

"Ooooh - well, aren't you scary," it felt like the world itself pressed upon his shoulders as he took a step - just one - towards Satsuki. The sound of his boots against the floor echoed far louder than possible. But forcing himself to remain focused - not just because he didn't want Satsuki Kiryuin's legendary swordsmanship used on him, but for Xion - Axel swallowed the lump in his throat before summoning as much power as possible, drawing *everything* to the surface until nothing remained inside his body, "BUT LET'S PUT THAT TO THE TEST!!!"

A wave of darkness exploded outwards, evaporating under the superheated flames following in its wake as every surface between Castle Oblivion's front door and the fire protecting Xion *melted* to a menagerie of molten rocks, magma and crackling lava. Not an inch was spared. The air itself simmered. Every drop of water outside his and Satsuki's bodies evaporated into steam.

It was, in essence, a living hell.

"All you have to do is surrender," in the midst of the hellscape, searing fire clinging to his coat like raindrops, Axel honestly chuckled, "Then I'll make it all stop."

"Hmph."

Something about Satsuki Kiryuin's response unnerved the flurry of dancing flames. Ignorant of the fire attempting - futilely, at that - to sear the flesh from her bones, she shifted one foot backwards. Flames danced around her face, highlighting the intensity of her glare. One after another, several knuckles cracking, her fingers tightened around Muramasa, gripping the blade with passionate vigor, "You're still talking?"

He blinked.

And Satsuki vanished.

"What the - "

Spinning around, heart racing several miles per second, eyes whipping back and forth as every crackling flame sounded like footsteps, Axel tightened his guard, " - where the hell did she go!?"

"Looking for someone?"

Not so much whispering behind his back as she was mocking the futility of his actions, Satsuki thrust Muramasa several times in rapid succession, the weapon reducing to a shadowy blur. In the transient moment between heartbeats, more than thirty attacks registered onto existence's eternal ledger. At the same time, countless gashes appeared across the flurry of dancing flames' black coat. The fabric on his shoulders, thighs, arms and stomach split apart, introducing crescents of blood evaporating almost as soon as they escaped.

Yet none of her blows were anything more than flesh wounds - a testament to her self-restraint and Axel disappearing into the inferno halfway through her salvo.

CLANG!!!

Her arm twisted upwards at an oblique angle, intercepting the chakram aimed at her neck.

CLANG!!! CLANG!!!

First her shoulder, then her abdomen, Satsuki found herself on the defensive, parrying pinpoint blows from an adversary pragmatic enough to use the environment to his advantage.

CLANG!!! CLANG!!! CLANG!!! CLANG!!! CLANG!!! CLANG!!!

Satsuki glanced leftwards and rightwards. Sweat pooled between her brows, beading around her nose before falling towards the floor and evaporating halfway between her stomach and knees. Her hair lay matted against the back of her neck. Steam tainted by darkness and light wafted off Muramasa. And in the midst of the raging firestorm, pockets of air igniting throughout the room, alone with nothing but her thoughts for companionship, she patiently awaited Axel's eventual reintroduction with tempered determination.

Out of the corner of her eye, something fluttered.

Her head tilted ever-so-slightly in the direction of the sound.

Muramasa shifted between her fingers.

Feigning ignorance, Satsuki waited until Axel was upon her before spinning around and thrusting Muramasa's scabbard into his clavicle.

Only for the Nobody to dissolve into fire.

"Nice try!"

Dancing between the flames, Axel reemerged into existence behind Satsuki Kiryuin, chakram slicing towards her exposed back. He couldn't beat Ryuko's sister. He wasn't stupid. And his wounds were proof enough she was holding back *a shit ton*, otherwise he wouldn't still be kicking and breathing. But winning wasn't the point. He simply needed to stall the crazy powerful bitch long enough for Xion to run away, "But you won't forget this!"

At this point, he didn't care *where*.

Once Xion was anywhere in the world *except* Castle Oblivion, nothing - not even Xemnas - was stopping him from retreating in a not-so-orderly fashion.

KA-BOOM!!!

The simultaneous impact of orichalcum against phantasmal metal reached Castle Oblivion's upper floors.

A shockwave erupted from the point of contact, dissipating the sweltering heat long enough for sweat to once more bead upon Satsuki's forehead. Stars possessing the deepest blue hue shimmered around Muramasa while exploding hellfire not only disintegrated her glove, but half of her sleeve. Yet she did not yield. She did not submit. Stuck in a lingering fraction of time, present and future simultaneously coinciding, she pressed forward until the overconfident Nobody's chakram shattered into far too many pieces to count

"This has gone on long enough," dragging out the words as Axel retreated across the foyer, Satsuki sighed, "Either allow me to speak with Xion or I shall stop holding myself back."

"Sorry," shaking his tingling fingers, bits and pieces of metal stuck in his coat, Axel tossed aside the shattered chakram before summoning a new one, "But that's not gonna happen."

"Then you leave me no choice..."

Satsuki breathed deeply, inhaling sweltering flames before her heels *crashed* against the floor, culminating in an explosion of light and willpower impossible to fathom, "... if you refuse to concede, then prepare yourself! For I, Satsuki Kiryuin, shall show you no mercy!"

Last edited: Sep 21, 2020

Chapter 21.7 [Day 255 - Part IV]

[img:

https://www.khwiki.com/images/thumb/7/78/Day_357_03_KHD.png/800px-Day_357_03_KHD.png]

Xion laid on the floor.

She couldn't understand why she'd run away.

Axel was her friend.

She should have helped him.

But when that woman walked into Castle Oblivion, something changed. About who she was. And who she'd been. Not only about the present, but the past and future. Everything felt different. Yet everything felt the same. It was confusing. Because when she saw that woman... and the woman saw her... something inside her chest *broke*. Half-forgotten dreams and memories blossomed into an orchestral rainbow impossible to ignore no matter how tightly she'd shut her eyes or covered her ears. So many places, sounds and colors, and memories.

All revolving around Satsuki.

"Satsuki..."

The name felt strange, almost like this was the first time she'd said it in forever.

Xion rolled onto her back. She balled her hands into fists, dragging them against the floor as some measure of stability returned to her mind, "... how do I know her?"

She thought about the question for a long time. A really long time. Long enough, she quickly found out to her embarrassment, that her butt fell asleep. Shifting awkwardly while doing her best not to get off the floor, Xion finally relented, sitting up and sighing. She needed answers. That was why she was here, right? To find answers about her past... who she was... and why some part of her heart had been really *happy* seeing Satsuki walk into Castle Oblivion.

"How did I know to come here?"

Without the distraction of running through the castle, descending floor after floor before reaching the lowest basement and walking through the darkness, there was nothing to stop her thoughts from spiraling around themselves. How had she known to come here? How did she *know* Vexen's lab was at the bottom of the castle? And that she needed to walk into the darkness to find it? It felt like the deeper she traveled, the more confusing and convoluted everything got. Almost like Wonderland. But was somehow knowing she needed to go down instead of up that important?

Xion chose to believe it wasn't.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, held it for a moment, exhaled, and promptly said the first thing that came to mind.

"It's... really tacky..."

Brushing dirt, cobwebs and dust from her knees and sleeves, she planted her hands between her knees and stood up. Even covered with darkness, the Chamber of Ruminations looked wrong. Everything felt... cold and stale. Like something terrible happened. She couldn't believe this was the same place Saïx brought her. But it felt really familiar, a feeling that refused to disappear. Taking a deep breath, exhaled and shaking her head, Xion placed one foot in front of the other, walking deeper into Vexen's lab while looking around. The Organization's symbol was etched on almost everything, from the tiles beneath her boots to the strange machinery. An obnoxious smell

between old laundry and detergent grew increasingly pungent the further she traveled.

And when something bumped against her shoulder - or rather, her shoulder bumped against something - she almost jumped out of her coat.

They hung from the ceiling, suspended from cables twisting slightly with every minor disturbance. Half-finished, limbs and parts missing, faces smooth as porcelain and wires snaking through holes drilled into their bodies, countless mannequins judged her reaction with eyes that didn't exist. As her heart raced, Xion swallowed the lump in her throat before reaching out and cautiously poking one of the puppets. Instead of springing to life, or doing something terrifying, it swung back and forth, gently colliding with another mannequin before both stopped moving.

"It's... it's... just a puppet..."

As the lifeless mannequin swayed back and forth at nothing more than the push of her finger, Xion felt her eyes slowly glaze over, "... puppet..."

"How goes the heart collecting, poppet? Fight any strong Heartless out there?"

"No," tearing herself away from that train of thought, she scrunched her eyes shut, "That's just a stupid nickname."

After slapping her cheeks for good measure, leaving her face tingling and mouth momentarily numb, Xion turned away from the incomplete mannequins. She walked, unsure where she was going. She followed the only path through cold machinery, marble tiles giving way to metal catwalks only to return to marble tiles. A hiss of compressed gas overhead brought out Senketsu in a flash of crimson. She breathed, one hand clenching her heart as the Keyblade vanished. That's when she saw it - a lotus-shaped pod in the back of the lab. And the sphere looming over the pod, fading red

light radiating through glass windows. She couldn't breathe. Her blood froze. She wanted to look away. But something wouldn't let her.

A malevolent presence wrapped around her thoughts, refusing to relinquish its stranglehold as two words passed through her lips before she realized she'd spoken.

"... Life... Fibers..."

She never saw the desk.

Neither did her stomach.

"Oof!"

Eyes opening without ever really closing, Xion stumbled backwards, rubbing her sore ribs. Not so much in pain as completely embarrassed, she grunted before realizing everything in the room felt *brighter*. Different. Maybe newer? One hand holding her stomach as whatever discomfort faded, she blinked. It felt like someone poured freezing water down the back of her neck. The desire to say some of the terrible words she'd heard Xigbar muttering to himself when he'd thought nobody was around faded into the darkness. Breathing shallowly as everything returned to something resembling normalcy, Xion chanced another glance as the machinery behind Vexen's computer, shook her head, reached forward, pulled Vexen's keyboard close to the edge of the desk and cautiously pressed several keys.

An unmistakable electrical hum filled the Chamber of Ruminations as the computer booted up for the first time in months.

Followed by three green words blinking on and off, on and off, on the central greyish-black monitor.

>>>>>> PLEASE INPUT PASSWORD <<<<<<

"Password?"

Somewhere far above, locked in the struggle of his life, Axel threw everything at Satsuki Kiryuin. He unleashed his prodigious pyrotechnics against the swordswoman, holding nothing back. His breathing was labored, blood trickled from his mouth and despite putting on a brave façade, the flurry of dancing flames favored his right leg. All for a single cut stitched on Satsuki's cheek. A wound that did not seem to reach the former heiress's attention as she stepped forward and teleported *through* Axel, leaving behind several slashes that unleashed torrents of blood long after her boots *clacked* against the molten floor.

Xion heard none of that.

"There's a password!?"

She panicked.

Grasping for hope only to find nothing but despair, knees trembling and heart pounding, Xion fell to the floor, fingers trailing off the desk one by one. What was she going to do? She needed answers. But without the password to Vexen's computer, they'd remain lost forever. Disobeying Xemnas... keeping everything a secret from Roxas... tricking Saix into unlocking the castle computer... betraying her friends... if she couldn't find anything about her past and missing memories, it would have been for nothing if she couldn't figure out the password.

"Huh?"

A piece of paper was taped to the underside of the desk. Xion stared at it. In her head, the paper stared back, as if wondering what she found so interesting about it. She didn't know when she reached out. Or grabbed it, accidentally tearing a corner. At some point, she'd stood up, holding the piece of paper in front of the computer while silently sounded out the word. It was barely legible and the cursive awful. But eventually she figured it out. Maybe. Because it didn't

seem like a word. But staring at the combination of consonants and vowels arranged unlike anything she'd seen before, head tilted sideways and fingers slowly scratching the back of her neck, Xion turned around, mouth scrunched.

What did she have to lose?

>>>>>> THAUMAVORES <<<<<<

To her surprise, it worked.

"Alright -" the piece of paper forgotten, Xion settled her fingers on the keyboard, " - if I were Vexen, where would I keep my - aha! There it is!"

The computer was similar enough to the one back at the castle that it took only a handful of seconds, maybe a minute or two, to find her way to the innermost database, its scientific name lost in a sea of terms and phrases she'd stopped remembering months ago.

>>>>>>>> Castle Inner Surveillance

>>>>>>>> Castle Outer Surveillance

>>>>>>>> Replica Information

Xion blinked.

There were three folders, none of which seemed useful.

"Uhh... what?"

This wasn't what she'd been expected to find. At all. Surveillance was obviously not where she wanted to search. And the only other choice... replicas or whatever... appeared equally unhelpful. There had to be more! If Axel had been telling the truth about Saïx bringing her to Castle Oblivion, Vexen should have written something about it! Detailed reports complete with annoying terminology, fancy words and a constant, never-ending sense of superiority that made

everyone else feel stupid. Biting her lower lip, Xion stared at the screen, hollow eyes retaining some measure of hope, before shaking her head. She wasn't thinking clearly. The answer was obvious - Vexen had simply put everything that didn't involve surveillance and blackmailing other members of the Organization inside the third folder.

"Okay... okay..."

Repeating herself, Xion double-clicked the only possible option, "... let's try... replica information?"

>>>>>>>>> **Audio Logs**

>>>>>>>>> Written Reports

>>>>>>>>> Security Measures

>>>>>>>>> Containment Protocols

She stared at the screen.

"... what? No... it has to be here... somewhere..."

Hoping Vexen might have talked about her past between rambling speeches about hearts, memories and other subjects that lulled her to sleep, she chose the first choice.

>>>>>>>>> **Memory Replica Models**

>>>>>>>>> Ryuko Replica Models

Without stopping to consider the first option, Xion opened the second folder.

>>>>>>>>> **Models I to VII**

>>>>>>>>> Models I to VII

>>>>>>>>> Models VIII to XIV

>>>>>>>>> Models XV to XXI

>>>>>>>>> Models XXII to XXIV

Her fingers scrapped against the keyboard.

Models? Twenty-four of them? Xion swallowed the lump burgeoning inside her throat. Then she heard it - a voice so very much like her own yet incredibly different encouraged her to keep going. It *insisted*. And she wanted to. More than anything, she needed to know the truth, no matter what. About her missing memories, dreams and past. Her friends, family and life before the Heartless stole away her heart.

>>>>>>>>> **Model XXII [Logged - February 19]**

>>>>>>>>> Model XXIII [Logged - June 11]

>>>>>>>>> Model XXIV [Logged - October 23]

Three files popped onto the screen.

She clicked the first one.

And listened as Vexen's voice emerged from speakers hidden throughout the Chamber of Ruminatation.

"Audio Report of Ryuko Replica Model XXII, February 19th. Sigh, where to begin? Very well, as anticipated yet arrogantly ignored, my twenty-second prototype was a failure. Due to a personal issue, I attempted to suppress the parasite's intrinsic genetic memory without first ensuring stability remained above the standard threshold of sixty percent. A problem that would have come to my attention had I run the standard battery of diagnostic tests instead of rushing through procedure. Huuh... sigh, during stage three of the amnesiac process, the prototype underwent rapid and catastrophic mutation reminiscent of Models VII, VIII, XI, XIV and XIX. Fortunately, the

Chamber of Ruminations' suppressions systems destroyed Model XXII before it managed to escape and damage any precious equipment. A setback, to be sure, but an interesting conundrum. Each mutation, no matter the prototype, follows the same transformation - the skin turns vibrant green, eyes yellow, blood simultaneously evaporates and coats their limbs, which individually change sizes. Perhaps this is an indication of their progenitor's true appearance? In any case, the current line of research has reached a dead end. Or... perhaps not? Even in haste, I may have been onto something. Instead of suppressing their memories after the parasites settled into their new form, why not before? Hmm... that could work. End Audio Report."

"Ryuko... Replica... Model?"

No matter how many times she repeated the words, they felt wrong, sour and rotten.

Perched over the keyboard, her thoughts drifted towards the mannequins hanging from the ceiling.

And with growing trepidation, Xion opened the next audio report.

"Audio Report of Ryuko Replica Model XXIII, June 11th. Ahem, as predicted, my suppositions concerning the origins of Model XXII's abject failures were accurate. What little diagnostics I've managed on the residual fibers indicates the rapid mutation was merely an innate response to memory tampering. If I'd been paying attention and not been distracted by Xigbar's incessant suspicions about my research, I would have corrected the issue long before it got out of hand! That son of a... ahem, as I was saying, genius sometimes arises not from success but failure. Although I had not originally planned on pursuing this particular theme of research, it's impossible to deny the results. I had expected some improvement - perhaps ten to twenty percent. A noticeable, although not outlandish, improvement. A steppingstone towards increasing the efficiency of subsequent prototypes. But I was mistaken. Contrary to my wildest expectations, by inducing the amnesiac process during in vitro

cultivation, stability remarkably improved. I'm quite impressed. It might not be enough for Model XXIII to survive outside the Memory Pod for more than a handful of seconds, but it's sufficient to determine I AM onto something extraordinary. Hmm... perhaps repeating the experiment with identical variables will provide useful data. End Audio Report."

Her heart was pounding.

One file remained.

Xion didn't know how long she stood in front of the computer. The silence pressed against her ears. Exhilaration stabbed her heart. She felt excitement, nervousness and apprehension and other emotions wrap themselves around her soul. What was she doing? Why was she hesitating to open the file? The conflict tore her existence in twin directions. Maybe it was impossible to explain, not even to herself. But deep inside her heart, Xion knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the last file had the answers she sought. About her past... dreams... and missing memories.

It was an inkling of an idea without any basis other than desperation and naïve hope.

CLICK!!!

"Audio Report of Ryuko Replica Model XXIV, October 23rd. At last, I've achieved some measure of success! Through repetition of Model XXIII's cultivation and without adjusting a single variable or parameter, successful integration between parasite and replica not only surpassed the critical threshold, but hovers upon one hundred percent. I'm wary to believe such an impossibly great development, but one cannot deny reality. Diagnostics, both the basic battery as well as the advanced examinations, determined no measurable instability. Nor were any mutations discovered. Introduction of foreign biological organisms did not activate the parasite's instinctive desire to consume everything except themselves, as was the case with Model XXI due to an unexpected oversight in its dress patterns. Ugh,

what a waste of good material. Now, where was I? Ah, yes, Model XXIV appears to possess none of the problems associated with my earlier work. Its form is human - pigmentation normal, no sign of extraneous threading, teeth are normal, fingernails appear normal. The only mutation seems to be an inversion of Ryuko Matoi's sweeping bang of hair. Instead of to the left, Model XXIV's sweeps to the right. But I'm not concerned about such a minor defect. Not when I've finally achieved what I've dreamt of for nearly ten years! Proof that Xehanort's obsession with the heart is meaningless compared to what I've achieved! And yet... hmm... is this a breakthrough or a one in a million random occurrence? If I repeat everything perfect, would Model XXV follow in Model XXIV's footsteps or become yet another failure like Model XXIII? More research is required. Incidentally, another Nobody appeared in Castle Oblivion's upper floors, one connected to Ryuko Matoi's apprentice and capable of manipulating memories like they were but threading. Perhaps she holds the answers. in the meantime, Saïx will escort Model XXIV - which I've renamed No. i - to headquarters for observation and field testing. I've already put in a request for Axel to observe No. i for any signs of physical and psychological instability. With any luck, it will prove itself capable of wielding a Keyblade. End of Report."

Xion couldn't breathe.

She couldn't think.

Falling to her knees, no longer able to stand as everything - her past, her memories and existence - came crashing down around her, she cried, "... am I... am I... not real?"

Last edited: Sep 28, 2020

Chapter 21.8 [Day 255 - Part V]

[img: <https://i.imgur.com/nZrwuu5.png>]

Uuuggghhh..."

He had a splitting headache. The light stung his eyes. As consciousness returned not in an explosion of flames, but a mishmash of sounds and colors and half-remembered memories that weren't helping, Axel steadily pushed himself off the floor, "What the hell happened?"

"Finally awake, I see."

Axel's mind lurched.

Without stopping to think about anything, the flurry of dancing flames rolled sideways, planted a hand against the floor and vaulted onto his feet.

In one swift motion, Axel backpedaled away from Satsuki Kiryuin, chakram shimmering into reality alongside crackling flames.

"I'd refrain from moving too much."

As the bronze doors leading into another room nearly identical to the castle's entrance foyer shut themselves behind her, Satsuki Kiryuin descended the steps with cadence normally reserved for formal situation. Her heeled boots *snap-clacked* against marble scarred by battle, most of the damage not Axel's flames or darkness, but Muramasa. Yet while addressing the Nobody, half-heartedly observing his movements for deception, her mind focused on the previous thirty minutes. Aqua claimed the castle was an impervious maze. Beatrix spoke of the transformed world as having more rooms

than grains of sand on all the beaches on all the worlds. One could search an eternity yet rise no higher than the second floor.

In her experience, having traversed more than fifty rooms only to end up where she'd began, they were both right.

"I healed your wounds, but restoration magic isn't perfect," reaching the bottom step, one hand grasping both Muramasa and scabbard, Satsuki tucked an errant bang of hair behind her ear, bringing the minor scar blemishing her cheek to Axel's attention, "Unless your goal is exsanguination, I would not keep jumping around like a mountain chocobo in the middle of mating season."

Axel couldn't mistake the dry sarcasm in her voice.

"Gee, thanks for the mental image," feigning gratitude for something he hadn't wanted or needed, Axel took advantage of his second lease on life to look around. He couldn't see or sense Xion. Did that mean she escaped? Or had Satsuki Kiryuin tracked her down? Chewing the inside of his cheek, he forced himself to confront the problem head-on, fire flickering around his chakram, "Now, if it's not too much trouble, how about you tell me something actually useful - like where's Xion."

"What good would knowing do?"

Clenched between her fingers, pale flesh turned peach in the ambient light, Muramasa glimmered with sharpness capable of slicing through reality itself, "Are you asking out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness? Do you seek closure? Guilt? Or perhaps you're simply bothered you could not finish her off yourself."

"Tch!" Axel snarled, "The hell do you know?"

Clack!

At the unmistakable *clack* of Satsuki Kiryuin's heels against the floor, brilliance enveloped the room.

Clack!

White light beyond recompense silhouetted her approaching form against a backdrop of complete emptiness.

Clack!

Axel wanted to close his eyes.

He wanted to blink.

But he thought about Xion... her smile and laugh...

Clack!

"What do I know?"

The question passed through lips not quite certain what to say. It percolated upon the darkness only to dissipate into nothing. As she marched past the Nobody, taking heed of Axel's weapon yet dismissing him as a threat in the same breath, Satsuki's voice remained flat yet possessed timber resonating throughout the castle itself, "I know a child cannot be blamed for the sins of their parents," cold contempt and derision marred her steel blue eyes. Not for Axel, who struggled to believe her words, but the man whom already perished, slain by the Grand Couturier.

A suitable punishment if not for the fact it prevented them from interrogating Ansem the Wise's student for information.

"Xion might resemble Ryuko, but that's where the similarities depart," prefacing her pronouncement by tilting her head backwards and staring at the alabaster nothingness separating the entrance hall from rooms numbering beyond infinity, Satsuki's expression tightened into something not quite a scowl, "She is her own individual. Her own existence. Blaming her for existing would be akin to the salmon blaming the fledgling for the actions of the golden eagle."

Clack!

By the silence pressing against her heart and soul, perhaps the anecdote was lost upon the Nobody. He wouldn't be the first. Nor the last, "The one who brought Xion into this world is dead. As far as I'm concerned, punishment has been meted. But only for *that*. Considering her company, I cannot help but wonder if you're a bad influence."

"Nice speech," despite being taller than Satsuki Kiryuin, Axel felt as if he was standing in the presence of a giant, "But I don't take kindly to threats."

Her shadow stretching across the ground, the air itself seemed to freeze as Satsuki returned Axel's question, "At what point did I threaten *you*?"

Axel balked, "The hell does that mean?"

"If Xion truly was created from Ryuko, she undoubtedly possesses my sister's powers. Including a Keyblade," she replied without raising her voice, which only drove her words deeper into the Nobody's soul, "It may be heartless, but if the worlds were ever threatened by her, I would not hesitate to strike down Xion simply because she vaguely resembles my sister."

The silence screamed into her ears.

Yet as her voice faded into the empty twilight filling Castle Oblivion, Satsuki awaited Axel's response towards her callous bluff? Bluff? The word clung to her tongue with the tenacity of syrup. No. It wasn't a bluff. If Xion's existence were to ever threaten the worlds or those she cherished, she would not hesitate to raise her blade against the teenager. But did that mean she wouldn't feel guilty about it? Not at all. Xion was not to blame for her existence or those who impressed their beliefs upon her mind. But as she had repeatedly told herself innumerable times since walking through the castle doors and seeing that face resembling her sister's, Xion was not Ryuko. And

even if she was Ryuko, if her sister somehow become a threat, she *still* wouldn't hesitate to strike her down.

"Do you honestly believe that will work?"

She didn't bother turning around, "At your best, you could barely touch me. What do you hope to accomplish in your current state?"

"You're right. I can't beat you."

Satsuki's magic might have healed his injuries, but that didn't mean he was in her debt. Wincing not from pain, but emotions he couldn't quite comprehend, not yet, Axel desperately aimed a chakram at the woman's retreating backside, "But from where I'm standing, I'm not the one walking away!"

Clack!

Satsuki stopped mid-stride, looked over her shoulder at the Nobody before derisively scoffing and resuming her previous actions, "Hmph - how interesting."

"What?" Axel's heart skipped a beat.

"And here I thought you were a Nobody, bereft of heart and emotions, unable to fathom the concept of attachment outside your memories," a hiss mocking not the wounded Nobody demanding answers, but the question itself, Satsuki sheathed Muramasa, "If that's truly the case, why do you care about Xion? What are your words if nothing more than excuses for your actions?"

"Who knows?"

At some point, Axel realized must've dropped his chakram, because they weren't in his hands, "Maybe I'm just not happy someone wants to hurt my friend, is all."

... friend...

The word lingered on Satsuki's heart.

"There's something I wish to ask."

The abruptness, or perhaps the professional ease, in which Satsuki shifted the conversation towards another subject took the flurry of dancing flames by surprise, "Huh?"

"The woman Xion compared herself to," choosing her words carefully lest they be misinterpreted in the worst fashion, Satsuki replaced Muramasa's scabbard upon her waist, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear along the way, "She wouldn't happen to be Nui Harime, would she?"

Axel's silence spoke more than any denial or admittance.

Only now, after marching into the Grand Couturier's trap, could she understand the truth. Sending her a letter through Mognet Central. Summoning her to Arendelle. Leaving behind a Navi-Gummi containing coordinates to the Land of Departure. Nui Harime had intended on her finding Xion. And discovering the connection between Xion and Ryuko. That was her insidious strategy. But why? Nui wasn't foolish enough to believe she'd fault Xion simply because Ansem the Wise's apprentice cloned Ryuko. There had to be something else. Another plan. One she couldn't discover without tearing away the surface layers. But what? The question barely registered in her heart before the truth blossomed. Her eyes widened, disgust and fury manifesting within their sapphire depths.

"Hey - "

It was stupid risking everything on a high-stakes gamble. Especially when it involved Satsuki Kiryuin. Luckily, he wasn't Luxord, " - you weren't after Xion, were you?"

"Of course, I wasn't," Satsuki exhaled, releasing the emotions roiling within her heart before they reached critical mass, "It took you this long to realize it?"

"Boy, that's one hell of a relief," sighing as everything he'd believed crashed and burned, in a good way, Axel glanced downwards, bit his lip and promptly focused his thoughts, "Let's cut to the chase, alright? You and me? We both know why that psychopath's interested in Xion."

"Perhaps."

"I might not be strong enough to protect her or..." he stumbled over what to say. Did he tell Satsuki about Roxas? Could he? Axel didn't know. Maybe it would help. Or maybe it would put Roxas in danger. *More* danger. Conflicted over what he should do, unable to make up his mind, Axel grabbed Satsuki's shoulder, "... but you've dealt with her, haven't you?"

Satsuki didn't say anything.

"Nui Harime's the reason... she's why..." it felt like everything was unraveling. His life. His friendships. His dreams. Axel didn't know when Satsuki pulled her shoulder away. But despite that, he kept talking, nearly shouting as she kept walking away, "... if she disappears, everything would go back to normal! Xion would be happy! Do that and I'll owe you one!"

Clack!

"Since when do I need *your* permission for anything?"

Satsuki's footsteps carried a certain weight impossible to measure as she deflected the Nobody's demand. Yet at the last moment, one hand on the castle door and the other holding Muramasa, she stopped. Instead of continuing through the threshold, boarding the *Bahamut* and leaving the Land of Departure, she tilted her head sideways, "But if I *were* to accept such a compromise, it would not be for something as trivial as a favor," softening her tone without sacrificing any authority which guided her heart, Satsuki scoffed, contempt lingering on her words, "I'd do it because Nui Harime is a

blight upon the worlds. Her darkness corrupts everything she touches. She must be destroyed. That much we both agree upon."

CREEEEAAKK!!!

"You claim to not possess a Heart?"

Halfway through the door, darkness and light clashing with equal strength over her existence, Satsuki ensured her final words were ingrained within Axel's thoughts, "I've encountered heartless monsters bereft of compassion and mercy. Beings who would not hesitate to sacrifice entire worlds for power. None them would have considered throwing themselves against someone they could not defeat to protect a friend."

Axel didn't know how to respond to that.

And by the time he did, Satsuki Kiryuin was gone, leaving him with nothing but failure for company.

DAY 255

~END~

Last edited: Oct 3, 2020

Chapter 22.1 [Day 260]

[img: <https://i.imgur.com/i2leBfl.png>]

"Huuuuuhhh..."

Dressed in what this world considered the latest fashion trends, entirely by choice and not because of anything dealing with keeping up some stupid charade, plus a few improvements designed to help her stand out in a crowd, Nui Harime sauntered down the sidewalk.

It had taken some time, but she'd come to appreciate old-world aesthetics.

This wasn't her first visit to the city of New Orleans, Well, it was for this version. Not her old world's. The yearly fashion weeks weren't spectacular compared to Paris, Milan and even Tokyo, but whenever and wherever Revocs's greatest and latest designs were released for the pigs in human clothing to gawk and fight over, she, as the Grand Couturier, needed to attend and answer questions while pretending to give a *crap* about whether Ragyo Kiryuin was available for interviews. But now that she saw the universe with open eyes and a fresh perspective, Nui wondered if her world's version of New Orleans had been like this - a quaint yet vibrant city full of life, humans and a mystical aura clinging to the bayou and streets like a thick blanket.

She didn't quite know.

And it was too late to really think about such useless nonsense.

Not when she had an appointment to keep.

Clack!

Speaking of which...

It had taken the better part of a week, spending lots of time sightseeing and visiting the local landmarks, for her target to finally introduce himself. And she had to say, he wasn't that charming. Or dangerous. Not nearly as much as the local legends. Oh, sure, perhaps he could convince humans into believing he was personable, affable and gregarious. And darkness *did* cling to his heart. A rather large amount of darkness. But he was still human. Just one with an exceptional flair for dramatics and atrocious yet somehow matching sense of fashion that only made her want to kill him even more.

"Enchante, mademoiselle."

While she was contemplating *how* to kill the man, he introduced himself, exposing the noticeable gap between his front teeth with a sickeningly sweet smile. And while she pretended to be surprised, on the inside, Nui felt like throwing up. If she didn't need him, she would have already killed him. Yet keeping those thoughts and feelings buried deep down, she bit her tongue when the horribly dressed human continued what ~had~ to be a well-rehearsed speech, "A fine afternoon, is it not?"

Oh, she ~really~ wanted to kill this human.

"Mes excuses!" feigning shock, not a lot, just enough to convince the human she was a naïve young woman unfamiliar with the underbelly of society, Nui pressed a hand against her chest, pretending to still her beating heart, "But do I, um, know you?"

Genuflecting alongside a seeming disarming smile, the man tipped his head forward, catching his hat atop his cane, "Folks around these parts call me Facilier. Doctor Facilier."

She, of course, already knew that.

But *he* didn't know that ~she~ knew that.

"A doctor?"

With a dramatic flourish for nothing more than amusement, plus a little sleight of hand and magic, Facilier offered the woman a purple card, "My card."

"Tarot readings. Charms. Potions," keeping up the faux French accent, Nui blinked, "Dreams made real?"

"Just some standard flourish," Facilier pinched his fingers together, "And some pizzaz," a twist of his cane bounced his hat upwards, whereupon it landed atop his head, "Plus, a little sleight of hand," now holding the card the woman had been reading only a few moments ago, he swept both sleeves, "Oh, do forgive my manners. Here I've been talking and talking without asking for the name of the lovely young lady respectfully granting me a few minutes of her time."

"Adeline André, but my friends call me Adeline," Nui laughed. On the inside, of course, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine."

For the second time, she felt like throwing up *and* murdering him.

But she'd come all this way for a reason, and that reason was the *only* reason she allowed the obnoxious pig in human clothing to guide her down the street.

"Now, I'd wager, and I'm not a man who fancies games of chance, something terrible weighs your heart," stepping aside Adeline, Facilier tutted, "An upcoming wedding, perhaps?"

Nui gasped.

Yet not for the reason the human believed.

Marriage? Her? To a *human*? The mere ~thought~ of something so utterly ridiculous it escaped meaning made her skin positively crawl. Her eye twitched. A glimmer of purplish-pink light shimmered around

her fingers, which were clasped behind her back. But keeping everything locked up tight inside her heart, Nui played along with the human's pathetic attempt at divining her future through sleight of hand, courtesy of the meaningless ring he'd seen on her finger, "How on earth did you know about Alexandre?"

"A lucky guess."

Glancing this way and that way and every which way, Facilier gently nudged Adeline into the alleyway away from wayward eyes and anyone who might rub their nose into his sensitive business, "Now, maybe it's just my imagination or last night's cooking isn't sitting well, but you seem a little bothered. Almost like you're meandering the long road of life without any clue where you'll head up," as soon as they crossed the threshold between the sidewalk and alley, his devilishly handsome shadow stretched along broken plaster and brickwork, "Or what you're missing along the way."

Nui, of course, noticed his sentient shadow.

It was a neat trick.

But feigning a measure of stupidity she'd last witnessed in Ryuko's best friend, she muttered, "I *have* been feeling restless lately..."

"I've seen it before," shaking his head while clicking his tongue, Facilier grumbled, "A fine young woman such as yourself - no offense, I'm merely paying my respects - hitched before she has the chance to explore the world. To spread her wings and *fly*!" without giving Adeline the chance to argue otherwise, he lightheartedly chuckled, "Now, I ain't suggesting you throw your fiancé to the curb. No, you love Alexandre," the rusted gate creaked as they walked through, blown upon gusts of dead wind, "Yet you want to make the decision on your own. To marry and settle down at your own pace."

Underneath the dead tree, talismans and assorted charms hanging from its bare branches, he strutted ahead of Adeline, spun around and aimed his cane at her chin, "Stop me if I'm getting cold."

"Oh, um..."

Wringing her hands together while pretending to fall for his pathetic salesmanship, Nui imagined skewering him, "Attendez, you're not one of those charlatans Alexandre warned me about, are you?"

Facilier's eye twitched.

"Ah, aha, I could see where you might think that," chuckling awkwardly, he wagged his finger, smiling all the while, "But I'm not a purveyor of parlor tricks! And don't dare deride me with accusations of charlatanry! Why, with just a thought - " slamming his cane against the ground, Facilier conjured a burst of wind, " - I could fulfill your wildest dreams!"

And then laughed.

"Sorry, that's just a little magic. Something we have down here in Louisiana. But you got my point, right?"

One jaunt to the right, a skip forward and a tap of his cane later, Facilier stood before his shop.

A nod caused the door to open.

"So, relax," rugs and tapestries covered the walls. Candles burst into life, orange light drawing one's attention towards the table. Shrunken heads dangled from the ceiling. Foggy jars containing unholy ingredients shimmered as his shadow moved while the masks remained still, "And let's see what your future holds in store..."

Standing in the doorway, silhouetted against the sunlight, Adeline's smile widened.

Right before she began [singing](#).

"Will you walk into my parlour?" said a spider to a fly.

"'Tis the prettiest little parlour that ever you did spy.

The way into my parlour is up a winding stair,

And I have many pretty things to shew when you are there."

"Oh no, no!" said the little fly, "to ask me is in vain,

For who goes up your winding stair can ne'er come down again."

Beneath her cloche, pink and embroidered with flowers, Nui Harime
tittered as she slowly closed the door.

"I'm sure you must be weary, with soaring up so high,

Will you rest upon my little bed?" said the spider to the fly.

*"There are pretty curtains drawn around, the sheets are fine and
thin;*

And if you like to rest awhile, I'll snugly tuck you in."

"Oh no, no!" said the little fly, "for I've often heard it said,

They never, never wake again, who sleep upon your bed!"

She snapped her arm outwards, stitching the human's animated
shadow to the wall with well-placed tacking needles composed of
light.

Said the cunning spider to the fly, "Dear friend, what shall I do,

To prove the warm affection, I've always felt for you?

I have, within my pantry, good store of all that's nice;

I'm sure you're very welcome-will you please to take a slice?"

"Oh no, no!" said the little fly, "kind sir, that cannot be,

"I've heard what's in your pantry, and I do not wish to see."

Facilier gasped when his entire arm went numb.

"Sweet creature!" said the spider, "you're witty and you're wise.

How handsome are your gauzy wings, how brilliant are your eyes!

I have a little looking-glass upon my parlour shelf,

If you'll step in one moment, dear, you shall behold yourself."

"I thank you, gentle sir," she said, "for what you're pleased to say,

And bidding you good morning now, I'll call another day."

Upon finishing the fourth stanza, Nui's false accent vanished.

"Here's a quick lesson," her blonde hair, short and prim, moved nary an inch despite the swaying of her hips, "You ~really~ should check who you invite into your house. Because they might not be as ~stupid~ as your Friends."

"Stupid?"

Although he was still unable to move his arm, Facilier managed a malicious smile, "You shouldn't have said that," as the sound of drumbeats grew louder and louder, closer and closer until it pressed against his eardrums, he desperately turned towards the animated masks on the wall, "Surely you fellas ain't about to allow this disrespectful harlot talk down to you like that, are you?"

It was laughter.

Yet it was not laughter.

For lungs could never create such a sound.

"Aha!" all around him, summoned from the darkness by his Friends from the Other Side, shadows enveloped his parlor, "Now, this is more like it!"

Reminiscent of ancient Loa, possessing yellow eyes and stylized hearts on their stomachs, the creatures didn't hesitate to follow his Friends' orders. Would they follow his orders? He didn't know. And he wasn't rude enough to beg his Friends for the opportunity. These demons cast from the shadows of wayward hearts obeyed only the darkness. The stronger the darkness, the stronger the loyalty. While he was well-versed in darkness, voodoo and assorted black magic, his Friends, on the other hand, were *far* stronger. Brushing a sleeve as his Friends feed his shadow from Adeline's trap, Facilier watched the single-minded creatures surround the woman, claws seeking to tear her heart and soul from her body and leave but a husk in their wake.

He never saw her move.

"Gosh, out of curiosity," as the final Heartless vanished, Nui fixed her cloche, which had fallen askew, leaned forward and rested her chin atop Seamstress, "When were your powerful friends planning on showing up?"

"Oh, um, you... I..." it occurred to him, perhaps a tad too late, that he might have stumbled across something perhaps not as unforgiving as his Friends, but quite up there. She wasn't a Loa. She was something older. Something more powerful, "I meant every word! Honest!" as he backpedaled away from Adeline, Facilier reached for something - anything - only to end up grabbing the tablecloth and falling to the floor, "I really was going to help you! You have my word!"

"Gosh, you sure do have an inflated sense of worth!"

Nui's smile tightened while her eyes, previously full of mirth, noticeably darkened. It wasn't so much a request as a directive that she didn't want to listen to his cowardly sniveling. It was super

annoying. Far more annoying that Ryuko's irritating friend. Her heart clenched alongside a burst of emotions. But ignoring it, Nui leaned forward until Seamstress appeared to be the only thing preventing her from falling onto the floor. And then she finished talking, "Sure, I ~could~ kill you. It would be ~really~ easy! But I didn't waste an entire week waiting for you to introduce yourself just to kill you!"

Heart pounding, hat askew and eyes noticeably wider than they'd been all day, Facilier couldn't believe his ears, "Huh?"

"I'm looking for something."

Prefacing her explanation by demonstratively yanking Seamstress out of the floor and spinning it around her index finger, Nui twirled the purple and pink representation of her heart overhead before aiming it at the human, "Nothing too special. Just a key. A simple little key. Similar to this one. I want you and your Friends to find it for me."

"Oh... well..."

Facilier didn't *like* the woman's smile.

"That's, um, well, a rather generous proposal. Positively magnanimous, one might add," regaining his composure took a moment. As did standing up and calming his heart. But clearing his throat, smoothing his sleeves, he put on an air of confidence that didn't quite reach his voice, "Especially for a powerful being such as yourself. It's just... well... what's in it for me?"

"Hmm?"

"No disrespect!" cutting himself short before he said something he'd regret, Facilier raised his hands and laughed, all too aware his Friends were paying close attention to their every word, "It's just that I've got plans for this town. Lots of plans! And, ahem, dying ain't exactly good for business."

"Why didn't you say so?"

She reached into her dress.

Literally into her dress.

And withdrew a stack of bills too thick to have fit inside.

"How does one thousand dollars sound?" smiling pleasantly, Nui tossed the money to Facilier, "Consider that a bonus advance," as the human thumbed through the useless money she'd appropriated from Eli LaBouff several days ago, she continued, "You help me find this key and I'll give you another thousand dollars. Do we have a deal?"

Facilier gawked.

His shadow gawked.

This was money.

Real money.

A lot of money.

And it was his.

"Well, it appears I've underestimated your generosity," coughing, Facilier tucked the wad of money into his vest, tapping the bulge for good measure, "So, you want me to find you a special key?"

"That's right," Nui repeated, "You ~can~ find it, can't you?"

"Oh, yes, definitely," his Friends were still uncharacteristically silent. Oh, they were watching Adeline. And himself. He could see the malevolence within their eyes. And the way their expressions shifted when he met their gaze before slapping his hands together. Not that he could particularly blame them. This was, after all, the first time since Mama Odie someone destroyed their shadows, "But it might take some time."

"That's fine."

A smile graced the former Grand Couturier's façade, "But double-cross me and you'll experience ~firsthand~ what happens when someone breaks every bone in your body, heals you and does it ~again~."

"Me? Betray you? Why, I wouldn't dream of such an abhorrent and underhanded concept," suppressing his nervousness at the visceral promise, Facilier picked up a chair, pulled out his coattails and sat down, one leg crossed over the other, "Especially for a woman after my own heart."

"Oh please," matching his conceited smile, Nui giggled, "You have ~no~ idea what's inside my heart."

Last edited: Oct 9, 2020

Chapter 22.2 [Day 270]

[img: <https://i.imgur.com/VltztZJ.png>]

"Preposterous."

The girl sitting across the dining room said nothing.

"To believe another one of these... foul creatures... existed. Furthermore, one replicated from Master Ryuko's Life Fibers," on the leather-pleated couch, dusty and weathered through countless seasons, DiZ emphasized his words with specific intent. In front of him, downloaded from the Chamber of Ruminations' computer weeks before Xion's visit to the desecrated castle, were copies of his pupil's research. Information he'd purposely concealed from Nui Harime before destroying the original data, "I'd known Even's research into the thaumavores bordered on the sacrilegious. But to be this foolish? For all we know, this *thing*... this Xion, as he called it... is as malevolent and dangerous as Nui Harime."

"What if you're wrong?"

DiZ ignored the weak-willed and barely audible voice until its source once more deigned to intrude upon his introspection.

"What if Xion's nothing like her?" hands clasped upon her knees and eyes staring at the floor, as DiZ glanced upwards, Naminé shrunk into herself, "What if she really is like Ryuko?"

"Do *you* believe Xion's harmless?" countering with audible sarcasm, the deposed ruler patiently waited for Kairi's Nobody to explain herself. Or provide an answer. Not that he would listen. Between the two of them, only he possessed intricate and detailed knowledge of Life Fibers and the dangers posed by the voracious parasites. But, as he'd predicted, Naminé drew inwards, choosing silence over

further argument, no matter how wrong she was, "I thought so. You've met that creature but once. Even so, did you not immediately understand how *dangerous* Nui was?"

The crackling from the fireplace only served to deepen the tense silence.

"What does she want?" Naminé whispered, her voice momentarily breaking.

"Want?"

DiZ could not help but scoff at the utter ridiculousness, "You desire to know what something like Nui wants?" repeating the question, his amber eye narrowed, "I've sacrificed countless nights searching for that very answer," at times such as these, he couldn't help but curse his intelligence, hatred and insatiable thirst for revenge against Xehanort. Despite his efforts otherwise, he could still remember the horrible sensation of teetering upon the precipice, one push from falling to his death, "I never came close, yet after Sora's journey through the halls of Castle Oblivion, before we removed him and his friends to this mansion, she paid me a visit, still disguised in that ridiculous getup."

Naminé's eyes widened.

"At that moment, unarmed except for something I wasn't certain would work, I'd resigned myself to the likelihood she intended to kill me."

Hoarse laughter from a throat unused to the amusement broke the tension.

"Instead, Nui *thanked* me."

His shoulders trembled as the nervous chuckling wormed its way down his spine and throughout the rest of his body. On the couch, surrounded by detailed description of his student's research into the

blasphemous, DiZ's laughter slowly faded, faltering into exhausted gasps, "She thanked me. For everything. As if I'd provided nothing more than room and board to a wayward traveler," leather crinkling, eye narrowing and breath hitching, he angrily punched the table in front of him without warning, scattering papers on the floor, "Then she had the audacity... the gall... to gleefully applaud my efforts at destroying her Life Fibers!"

The memory itself wasn't good, but it provided context.

A dark window into the mind of an abomination.

"But before she left, Nui offhandedly mentioned claimed she wasn't quite finished with my apprentice," dragging out the words as if they were virulent poison, DiZ looked at his hand and grimaced, rubbing the weary and arthritic digits with practiced vigor, "At the time, I didn't understand what she meant. Even was dead. She'd killed him in front of Sora. A memory you refuse to completely restore. Not that I can blame you. No child should remember something so... visceral."

His uncovered eye, amber as Xehanort's, shifted away from Even's detailed research and towards the amnesiac Nobody sitting across the room.

"The ultimate taboo, she'd called it," a groan passed between his lips as the obvious became apparent far too late to change anything. Irritation blossomed inside his heart, impotent in depth, scale and power. Unlike that monstrosity, he was only human, limited by biology, age and prowess. Even if Nui Harime stood perfect still, he couldn't kill her. Not in a million years, "From the moment she waltzed into this mansion, Nui had already known *exactly* what my foolish apprentice created."

Naminé folded her hands between her legs.

"And such *hatred*."

DiZ chose his words carefully, half of his expression twisted into a disturbed snarl, "If I hadn't grown accustomed to her mannerisms, I would have missed it, but whenever she spoke about my apprentice, it was accompanied by immeasurable hatred," he could feel his heart racing. An unstoppable march that left him gasping for breath and unable to steady his old hands, "No matter what, we *mustn't* let Nui locate Xion. A quick death is far more merciful than whatever torture that creature has in store for Xion."

"Nui's met Sora."

The admission - no, the confession - came so far out of left field that DiZ's train of thought derailed, "I beg your pardon?"

"I noticed in Castle Oblivion," whispering, Naminé fumbled over finding the right words, "In some of the rooms, his memories 'broke.' Like there was something missing. Something I couldn't see no matter, no matter how hard I tried I didn't tell Marluxia. Or Axel. But something was resisting my efforts to rewrite Sora's memories. It was... really confusing... until he walked through memories of his home and Ryuko wasn't there. That's when I realized the truth."

"Her Life Fibers interfered with your powers?" DiZ muttered as realization hit him.

"That's why some of Sora's memories remain complete," Naminé swung her feet back and forth, trying to focus on anything but the memories, "And why Ryuko is the only one close to Sora who still remembers him."

A barking grunt answered the Nobody.

"The connection between Life Fibers and memories are extraordinary."

Beneath the bandages and belts, the contours of the forgotten king's face shifted. Yes, Master Ryuko's attempts at convincing her sister, master and friends that not only did someone named 'Sora' exist, but

that he wielded a Keyblade, were well-known. But much the same way a ripple on a pond weakens the further it travels, Naminé's influence weakens as one's heart grows further from Sora's heart. Ryuko, as the boy's mentor and personal hero, stood closer to Sora than anyone, besides his friends, of course. On the contrary, Master Beatrix only met Sora once or two. Thus, she vaguely remembered a young boy wielding a Keyblade but nothing else.

"Even once came to me with a rather outlandish theory - he claimed Life Fibers were but individual pieces of a greater being. That even physically removed, the parasites remained inextricably connected," DiZ pulled as much information as he could remember to the surface, "He referred to it as the Original Life Fiber. Perhaps he was onto something."

"There's another."

DiZ's heart almost stopped, "What did you just say?"

"When I was calling Sora, I accidentally followed the memories connecting his heart with Ryuko's. That's when I felt encountered Nui. And something else," wringing her hands, Kairi's Nobody chewed on the inside of her cheek, "I can't remember much, but the presence protected me."

"Nonsense."

Casting aside her explanation, DiZ balked, "Are you suggesting there's a *benevolent* Life Fiber? Don't make me laugh."

"Maybe..." nascent feelings burgeoned in Naminé chest, "But we *need* to find Xion before Nui does. Because I don't think she actually plans on killing her."

"That we can agree on."

DiZ stood up, his robe sweeping against the floor as he walked past Naminé, "When Riku returns, inform him he is to immediately begin

searching the world for my foolish apprentice's experiment. We *must* find it before Xehanort or Nui."

Last edited: Oct 13, 2020

Chapter 22.3 [Day 271]

[img: <https://i.imgur.com/2oggOva.png>]

Twilight Town hadn't changed much.

Market Street looked the same. There was Elmina's Workshop, where the moogles were currently haggling over prices with someone who couldn't tell mithril from steel. Two or three new coffee shops had sprung up like weeds. Around the corner and through an alley was an outdoor theater. There was Jessie and Biggs's armor emporium, which was still closed to anyone younger than eighteen after some idiotic kids bought a couple of swords for a mock fight. And if she closed her eyes, she could smell the tantalizing cooking wafting from the Le Grand Bistrot down Market Street and beyond the Tram Common.

Well, maybe a few things had changed over the months.

On a bench, her back to a store window, sweat trickling down her forehead, a half-finished bottle of water on a box next to her shoulder and boredom running rampant through her heart, Ryuko counted the people walking through the streets. Twilight Town really *had* changed. Ever since Mickey and Sora closed the Door to Darkness, the depressing atmosphere clinging to the world disappeared. No more families looking over their shoulder. Or people vanishing in the dead of night. Or Heartless randomly attacking in broad daylight. Sure, as long as darkness existed, so would Heartless. And as long as she possessed a Keyblade, the damn monsters wouldn't stop trying to eat her heart. But things felt... better. A lot better.

And that was good enough.

Arms folded across her chest, boxes and bags stacked on either side of her body and three empty water bottles littering the ground

around the nearby trash can, Ryuko checked her watch for the twelfth time only to remember that not only was she *not* wearing a watch, she'd never *had* a watch.

"Geez, is she buying everything off the shelves?"

When she agreed to help Mako shop for baby stuff, she'd expected to hit the Commercial District. A simple shopping spree. What she *hadn't* expected was Mako bulldozing her way into her room at the crack of dawn, forcing a keg of coffee down her throat and clinging to her arm while she groggily flew her Gummi Ship halfway across the realm of light. But that wasn't the worst part.

The worst part was that she missed breakfast.

"Ugh, I'm starving."

Her stomach rumbled, thanks in no small part to the obnoxious smells of delicious food wafting across the commons. Tilting her head backwards, Ryuko stared at the clouds floating overhead, hoping the boredom would distract her heart. And it worked. But not thinking about food made her think about other things. Stuff she'd been trying to forget. Almost like a flipped switch inside her mind, her mood went from bored to foul without stopping along the way. Her eyebrow twitched. The corners of her mouth convulsed. She grumbled. And in the mid-summer heat of Twilight Town, she chewed the inside of her cheek.

"... I still can't believe it..."

A clone. She had a clone. And as if that wasn't bad enough, her clone was working with those asshole Nobodies. Luxord. Demyx. Saïx. Axel. Not to mention their boss. Chewing on her tongue in the hopes it would help, Ryuko resisted the urge to punch something. After spending some time - *a lot* of time - thinking about it - she'd come to a startling revelation. No matter how weird it sounded, she didn't care about having a clone. No, what seriously pissed her the goddamn hell off was someone, who she knew, took some of her

blood and Life Fibers without permission and used them in some freaky and perverted science experiment.

"Tch!"

Remembering everything Satsuki told her - and piecing together what her sister didn't tell her - Ryuko grumbled, "How the hell did Nui track down that creepy pervert? She should've left a piece of him for me to - "

"MWAHAHAHAHAHA!!!"

He dared not simply waltz out of the darkness like a common hoodlum. That would be much too disrespectful. On the contrary, his descent onto Traverse Town necessitated immense concentration, physical prowess and, yes, some luck. Not much. Simply enough to avoid the local authorities and those who believed he wasn't who he said he was. Which was, quite frankly, ridiculous. Still, as soon as he felt the hard yet pliable rooftop beneath his feet, knees bent outwards to avoid straining a tendon or two, Gilgamesh most certainly didn't jump forward to avoid faceplanting. And no matter what a few lying bystanders might have noticed, his forward somersault over a cat, sliding down a gutter before landing on the pavilion in front of Ryuko was masterfully executed even if he stumbled towards the end.

"I've been looking everywhere for you, Ryuko," announcing his jubilation at finally finding the Keyblade Master after days of searching, the infamous swordsman brushed aside what resembled twin mountains of merchandise surrounding his worthy adversary, "Do you know how long I've been searching?"

And just like that, Ryuko found her day ruined, "What do you want?"

"What? Snark and sass? Is that how you greet an old friend?"

Gilgamesh, wearing a slightly modified version Genji Armor, including forgoing a kabuto for a red hood with accompanying plume,

balked, "Bah! If I wasn't here on important business I'd turn around and leave you to ponder your failings!"

"Oh, yeah?"

One leg crossed over the other, arms folded and fingers impatiently tapping against her bicep, Ryuko considered smacking Gilgamesh with Threadcutter. Just to prove a point.

"What's stopping ya?" Ryuko's foot incessantly bounced against the ground as she threw Gilgamesh's empty threat back in his painted face, "It ain't like I'm keeping you here."

"Unfortunately, for you, I'm unable to do that," placing a tad too much emphasis on the second and third words of his response, if only to get the point across, the fabled swordsman renowned through the worlds as a purveyor of swords abruptly cut himself off. If looks could speak, his glower would curdle milk. Standing before Ryuko with two pairs of arms folded across a chest as broad as it was wide, he continued pontificated despite the unnecessary glare sent his direction, "And my reticence - ergo, why I stand before you today - is because of you, Ryuko!"

Her sneaker stopping mid-bounce, Ryuko squinted, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Must I spell it out? Are you deaf and stupid," aware of the sudden drop in temperature alongside a familiar crimson sparkling around Ryuko's fingers, Gilgamesh turned aside, pointed at the Keyblade Master and declared both passionately and concisely, "Thanks to you putting in a good word with the braggadocious Good King Moogle Mog XV, I'm not longer placed front and center upon Mognet Central's insane blacklist. Because of *you*, Ryuko, I can browse their wares without worrying about a significant and illegal price markup! I'm finally free to adventure without worrying about overly fiscal conservatism!"

Ryuko arched an eyebrow and reconsidered her reconsideration of not bringing out Threadcutter, "... and?"

"And? And? What is this, an echo chamber?" struggling to speak when facing such rudeness, Gilgamesh turned aside once more, ignoring the stares from onlookers, "Fine! Allow me to get straight to the point! Because of your assistance, I've traveled all this way, braving dangers beyond imaginations, to pay you back! No matter what you request of me, however difficult or embarrassing, I shall endeavor to do it! Within reason, of course."

"Pay me back?"

Gliding on its tracks, skating through Market Street while kicking up newspapers and garbage, the Twilight Town trolley passed behind Gilgamesh. But it was Ryuko who repeated his request in the most blunt and straightforward manner possible, "You're bullshitting me."

Insulted by the belligerent accusation, the swordsman nodded, "When Gilgamesh gives his word, you can take it to the bank! Something *you*, of all people, Ryuko, should know!"

"Yeah, yeah," chin on her hand and eyes rolling, Ryuko sat back and stared at the thief. What did she want? That was a good question. But a better question was what Gilgamesh was willing to give her. Even if she asked, she doubted Gilgamesh would hand over any of his swords. Or turn himself in. Or promise to never bother her again. Impossible shit. But sitting on the bench in the middle of the hot summer afternoon, tired and hungry, a brilliant idea quickly came into existence, "Alright, you want to pay me back for... whatever... right?"

"That's what I said five paragraphs ago!"

"Tell you what," ignoring his nonsense, Ryuko pointed over her shoulder at the store Mako was literally buying out from the manager, "You help Mako finish up her maternity shopping and I'll call us even."

Gilgamesh balked, "That's it? No request to leave you alone? Or end our rivalry?"

Ryuko didn't know whether to laugh or punch Gilgamesh, "As if *you'd* agree to that!"

"Well, no," the infamous connoisseur admitted without a shred of embarrassment,, "But the underlying point remains - "

"Then it's settled!"

Instead of letting Gilgamesh get another word in edgewise, Ryuko pushed herself off the bench, stretched her back before walking down the street, "Good luck!"

"Good luck?"

Standing in front of a bench covered by what had to be at least several thousand munni's worth of childcare, books and assorted products, Gilgamesh pondered what Ryuko must've meant by such an enigmatic statement. Good luck? Why did he need luck for such a trivial task? All he needed to do was assist her precocious friend with some shopping and they'd be even. He could go back to inquiring about sparring matches, betting one of his swords against the Scissor Blades and move on with his life. But still, something about the emphasis Ryuko placed on specific words didn't sit well with him. It almost felt like she was hiding something really important. But what could be important about shopping?

"A laughable attempt at scaring me," he concluded with a snort before sitting down, "As if I, the great Gilgamesh, would be intimidated by the prospect of purveying storefronts!"

Several minutes passed.

"What is she buying in there? Everything off the shelves?"

As though the world itself was mocking him, Mako Mankanshoku choose, simultaneously with him opening his mouth, to emerge from the store. Back-first and arms full of boxes and assorted merchandise. Including a child-sized carousel, although he didn't believe chocobos and moombas were quite so... happy. Bah! Those foul creatures were vicious, ill-tempered and rabid! But keeping such an unbiased opinion firmly to himself, Gilgamesh moved to help only to notice Mako was having absolutely no trouble carrying more than twice her body weight.

"Ryuko!"

Peering through a small window between boxes, red-faced despite her arms feeling perfectly fine, Mako's expression was the pinnacle of contentment, "They had almost everything on my - oh, hey, Mister Gilgamesh, when did you get here? Where's Ryuko? And why are you so sweaty?"

Instinctively, Gilgamesh lifted up an arm, smelled himself and promptly made a mental note to take a shower.

"Err... I suppose congratulations are in order," changing the subject at the drop of a hat, he stood up, looming over Ryuko's friend, without appearing at all intimidating, "Now, as for your question - I've come to this world to pay a debt. A debt, that is, to Ryuko for her assistance with a rather personal matter. For some reason, she's decided that helping you finish shopping is good enough."

"Oh goodie!"

"You can carry this!"

Mako didn't even bother asking *what* Gilgamesh meant. Before the swordsman could argue otherwise, she tossed every box in her arms, more than two hundred kilograms, through the air, over a stray dog and into the self-professed infamous collector of fine weaponry's. One after another, several thousand munni's worth of

merchandise landed in Gilgamesh's outstretched arms, falling perfectly into position until his chin stood propped upon a colorful box displaying a cartoonish chocobo wearing diapers.

"Of all the - " holding himself back, refusing to utter *what* was on his mind, Gilgamesh muttered, " - is this everything?"

"Oh, you have a funny sense of humor, Mister Gilgamesh," Mako quipped, devious yet innocent at the same time.

"Er, what?"

"I'm only halfway through the list!" just to emphasize her point, Mako excised a rolled-up paper from her pocket, half of which was crossed off, "Boy, Ryuko *really* got the better end of this deal, didn't she?"

Last edited: Oct 16, 2020

Chapter 22.4 [Day 276]

[img: <https://i.imgur.com/nmimFCU.png>]

"Go away."

She didn't turn around.

But when *he* refused to leave her alone, she grumbled, "I mean it."

The darkness melted off his body. Tendrils of shadows momentarily clung to his heart before returning to the writhing miasma severing the fabric of reality. As the temporary corridor sealed itself behind him, dissipating back into the void from whence it originated, Riku stepped onto Besaid Island, "Ryuko always liked this beach."

He couldn't see anything. Not anymore. Not unless he wanted Ansem's lingering darkness to work its way deeper into his heart. The light was cut off. But that didn't mean he couldn't feel the warmth of the midsummer sun. Or the smell of saltwater mixing with driftwood. It was everything he remembered. It was everything he'd destroyed because he surrendered to curiosity and trusted the wrong people. But behind the blindfold covering his eyes and darkening the world, Riku dwelled not on the past, but the present and future.

"Whenever she was in a bad mood, Ryuko complained about how a Keyblade meant always saving the worlds or fighting Heartless," taking another step towards Xion, Riku swept his attention towards the dock, where Tidus's dad's spare boat was absent. Memories assaulted his heart - learning how to play blitzball alongside Wakka, trying to hit Jecht only to fall flat on his ass. Shaking his head, Riku grimaced, "Until recently, I didn't understand what she meant. But now? I suppose having a Keyblade's far more of a responsibility that I'd always thought."

Pulling her knees closer to her chest, Xion stared at the ocean, half-lidded eyes watching the sunlight glimmer off turquoise waters, "I already know I'm not Ryuko."

"Yeah," the truth hurt. Especially a truth his painful. A fact Riku understood quite well. But some things needed to be said. As the tide crashed against the beach, foamy water parting around his boots, Riku shrugged, "You're right. You're not Ryuko. But so what? Even if you're not her, that doesn't mean you don't have the right to exist."

"Hmph," Xion's snort sounded weak, almost forced, as she pouted with traces of her normal personality, "Says the guy who tried killing me."

"You were stronger than expected," Riku responded with something resembling modesty, "If I hadn't gone all out, I'd have lost. But, you know, when I first saw your face, I knew you weren't Ryuko," pausing, if only for a moment to gather his thoughts, Riku craned his head towards Xion, "There just wasn't enough time to explain before... well..."

DON'T LOSE YOUR HEART

Crashing through the doors didn't so much hurt as leave her embarrassed.

"Tch!"

It was pouring. Raining cats and dogs. Mere moments after being kicked out of the castle by someone without the decency to introduce themselves, her gloves were already soaking wet. Lightning forked overhead, highlighting the statues standing guard on either side of the courtyard. Descending through the air, clearing the castle's front

steps before the massive doors finished opening, Xion lurched backwards, forcing her head nearly parallel to the ground to avoid the wing-like sword. Her right foot touched the ground first, kicking up waves of rainwater before her left foot landed inches behind the first. Senketsu swung upwards, deflecting the imposter's weapon in a flurry of sparks. Followed by another seven or so hits that left her out of breath but otherwise unharmed.

Saïx had been right.

There really was an imposter pretending they belonged to the Organization.

But this guy... this imposter... had appeared out of nowhere.

Literally.

He'd appeared out of nowhere.

He must have been waiting in the darkness for someone to investigate the castle. That was the only possible explanation for how quickly he appeared and, without so much as saying a word, decided to attack. As water dripped from Senketsu, coalescing into puddles alongside the rain trickling down her chin, Xion blinked. And then swung upwards with both hands to deflect the imposter's sneak attack. A powerful darkness-enhanced strike that left her arms feeling numb. But even so, she easily blocked it, much to his surprise. He might be fast and strong. But she was faster. She was stronger. And without the element of surprise on his side, there was no way he could win!

"How's this!?"

She leapt backwards, clearing several meters in a single bound while crimson-tinted light gathered into an incredibly dense orb in front of Senketsu, "Ragnarok!"

Countless beams of light, a lot more than she expected, shot forth, twisting and writhing through the rain towards the imposter. They homed upon his location. Even as he backpedaled across the courtyard, dodging and parrying and deflecting, it wasn't enough. One after another, accompanied by a low humming, her lasers slammed around him, throwing up clouds of dust and smoke while nearly knocking over one of the statues already showing signs of significant damage.

"Ha!"

Grinning with a wide and beamish smile, Xion basked in the feeling of being the one who brought down the organization's imposter, "You like that!?"

"Not really."

Her eyes snapped towards the castle exterior, where the imposter was hanging onto the stone façade with nothing more than his fingers. A trickle of blood oozed down his forehead onto the black blindfold covering his eyes. His grey hair lay matted from the pouring rain. And with a tone straddling the line between amusement and condescension, the imposter's voice deepened, "And I've felt worse."

Xion didn't have time to react when the imposter pressed his feet against the castle and pushed forward into the rain.

She tried swinging Senketsu, but it was far too late.

In a breathless moment, he landed behind her, gently skidding to a stop as blood gushed from her shoulder.

"GAH!!!"

Blood trickled down her arm, pooling between her fingers before dripping onto the ground, where it mixed with rain. Senketsu fell from her numb fingers, clattering to the cobblestone around her feet. It hurt. It really hurt. But powered by something basic, something she

couldn't understand, Xion didn't cry. She didn't collapse onto the ground. Gasping deeply, she burst into motion and tried punching the imposter in his annoying ace with her uninjured hand.

"Not bad," avoiding the haphazardly thrown punch by simply leaning out of the way, Riku swept Soul Eater sideways through the rain, splattering the blood coating its edge onto the ground around them, "But your moves were far too easy to -"

A darkness - a familiar and unmistakable darkness - emanated from the Nobody before he could finish.

It didn't so much explode outwards as push against existence itself, burning with unholy radiance. Even through his blindfold, ignorant to the world in order to keep Ansem's lingering presence at bay, Riku saw what happened with crystal clarity. The wound he'd inflicted with Soul Eater was regenerating. Not through magic. But something he'd seen before.

This wasn't a Nobody.

"Who are you?"

But she certainly wasn't her, that much he knew. It was a small consolation because if this girl was her and not merely someone else sharing their particular abilities, he likely would've already been killed. Or far worse. Refusing to wait until her wound finished regenerating, Riku reached out and yanked down her hood. She flinched, attempting to move out of arm's length. Which gave him time to jam a thumb underneath his blindfold and push it up enough to get a good look at her face.

And what he saw... who he saw... nearly stopped his heart cold.

"Impossible," backpedaling away from the girl bearing far too much of a resemblance to Ryuko for his liking, Riku didn't notice his blindfold slip back over his eye before he repeated his original question, "Who are you, really? Why do you look like her?"

"I don't have to answer your questions!"

The pain lingered. The pain always lingered no matter how fast her body healed. But the red light was already gone. She could move her arm. Pushing herself off the ground, disheveled hair dripping with water, Xion grasped Senketsu with both hands, "You're the imposter! And I'm going to take you down!"

"Gosh! I couldn't agree more!"

She sat upon one of the statues watching over the courtyard. Wearing a stylish double-breasted trench coat, belts hanging below her knee-length skirt, Nui twisted the matching pink and white umbrella between her fingers. With a smile not quite reaching her eyes and a tone anything but cordial, the retired Grand Couturier pursed her lips, "But I don't think you'll like the answer."

In one fell swoop, Riku forgot about the girl resembling Master Ryuko, "What are you doing here?"

"It's been a long time," Nui responded as if discussing the weather with an old friend she hadn't seen in quite some time, "You're really grown since the last time we met. Oh, are you still afraid of the big bad darkness inside your heart?"

"Huh?" staring at the strange woman, Xion couldn't explain the nervousness welling inside her chest. It felt... different... from fear. It was more like anger and disgust mixed alongside a baffling combination of hatred and annoyance. And despite her best efforts, a little bit of those emotions caused her voice to hitch, "Who are you?"

"Who am I?"

Several things happened at once.

One moment Nui was on the statue.

And the next, skipping through the space between worlds as easily as one drew breath, she reappeared between Xion and Riku, both of whom never noticed her arrival. That was, of course, until she gently tapped her umbrella against Riku's stomach, shoving him into an awaiting corridor of darkness that hadn't existed moments prior. All with a saccharine smile stretching across her face and an overwhelming malevolence clinging to every fiber of her being. Standing unflinching as his surprised shouting actually overpowered the thunderstorm for the fraction of a second it took the portal to shut, Nui propped her umbrella back on her shoulder, spun on her heels and tittered, "Sorry! But a pathetic imitation like you doesn't deserve to know my name!"

In a smooth and impossibly perfect motion, the former Grand Couturier aimed her umbrella squarely between the second-rate knockoff's eyes.

"Oh, don't look so sad," darkness illuminated by pinkish light oozed from her heart akin to rotting miasma, "After all, once I'm finished having fun, you'll be dead! But let's try to have some fun first!"

"HHHHAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!"

Xion didn't know why she attacked.

But something buried deep inside her memories was screaming at her to not let this woman make the first move.

Her first swing missed.

As did her next ten... then twenty... then thirty...

[img:

https://64.media.tumblr.com/69ff02ab8f87060711889fec7b624280/tumblr_p075rzx6w41v1hotuo3_540.gifv]

"Boy," dragging out her disappointment as she leaned around Xion's mockery of Ryuko's Keyblade, Nui kept her arms firmly pressed

against the small of her back, "You're a lot slower than I thought."

"S-Shut up!"

"Aw, if you want me to shut up, then you need to actually hit me," her body was a blur. To casual observers, at least. But to Nui, she was barely moving. And that was pathetic. Ryuko or even Satsuki could have forced her to actually try. Even Ryuko's master was strong enough to make her bring out Seamstress unless she wanted to find herself missing a head, legs and arms. But this? Pouting profusely while moving just enough to avoid the knockoff Keyblade desperately trying to inflict some damage, Nui giggled before finally, at nothing more than a whim, bringing out her umbrella.

CLANG!!!

"But let's be totally honest," her boots planted firmly on the ground and hair billowing not from the rain, but the shockwave accompanying her umbrella catching the pathetic imposter mid-swing, Nui leaned between their clashing blades until she was inches from that naughty Nobody's failure at recreating something perfect and unique, "We both know that's not about to happen!"

SHING!!!

Xion was the first to react.

In fact, she was the only one to react when a familiar sword appeared next to Nui Harime's neck.

"Back so soon?" unfazed by the apparent threat to her life, the former Grand Couturier's eyes swiveled leftward, moving simultaneously in the same direction, "Hmm... gosh, you are serious about killing me, aren't you? Still a little upset, huh?"

Ignoring the monster's taunt, Riku kept Soul Eater firmly pressed against her jugular despite knowing it meant nothing, "You promised never to come back."

Nui's smirk widened, "Did I?"

But she really didn't smile.

And a sense of eldritch dread crept over the courtyard, powerful enough that the Beast sensed the woman's presence from deep inside his castle.

"Sorry, in all this excitement, that must've slipped my mind," and just like that, the terrible feeling vanished, leaving Riku and Xion's pulses elevated and adrenaline rushing throughout their bodies. Drawing back her umbrella before, in one fell swoop, opening it and propping it back on her shoulder, Nui smirked, "Anyway, I'm just about done. She's simply too boring for what I have in mind. For now, at least," strolling forward without a care in the world, Nui purposely walked as close as possible to a terrified Xion, who could not move as the older being whispered into her ear, "No matter how hard you try, you're absolutely nothing like her. You're just a knockoff. A cheap imitation of the real deal."

DON'T LOSE YOUR HEART

"I want... I want to talk to Ryuko," as the memory faded into the wind, Xion pressed her forehead against her knees, "But I don't know if I should."

Conflicted between saying something or letting Xion continue to talk until she was finished, Riku waited several impossibly long seconds before going with his heart, "Why not?"

"I don't know," Xion confessed while counting grains of sand, "I guess I'm just afraid she'll hate me."

The tide rushed up the beach, depositing foam and seaweed while standing the sand a dark shade of brown. As her words, her confession, her fears and emotions, poured forth, Riku remembered something. It wasn't anything important. Or necessary. It didn't help the situation or provide an answer. But it helped make up his mind. And perhaps a little firmer than necessary, quickly shook his head, "You're wrong. Ryuko isn't anything like that."

For the first time since Riku emerged from the darkness onto Besaid Island, Xion picked her head up, "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Riku nodded.

"I..." she didn't know what to make of that. Was Riku telling the truth? Could she trust me? Xion wanted to believe him. She wanted to believe she wasn't anything but a secondhand imitation, "... what should I do?"

"That's up to you."

Riku's reticence remained long enough for the summer ambience to resume. He was never good at talking to people. That was Kairi's department. Or Sora's. Or Mako's. But knowing that Nui wanted Xion was more than enough incentive to follow DiZ's orders no matter how much he personally disagreed with the man. And knowing Xion was related to Ryuko was even more incentive to prevent Nui from laying a finger on her, "Ryuko always said you should let your heart be your guiding key. I won't make you do anything. But if you want, you could come with me."

Xion thought it over.

It was a hard decision.

One of the hardest.

If she went with him, she'd leave behind Axel and Roxas.

But if she didn't, she might never find the answers to her existence or meet Ryuko.

It was the hardest decision she ever made, "... alright."

Last edited: Oct 20, 2020

Chapter 22.5 [Day 276 - Part II]

[img: <https://i.imgur.com/nmimFCU.png>]

"Are you certain of this?"

The silence continued even as the figure sitting atop the tallest throne addressed his thoughts.

"Yeah," Xigbar knew when Xemnas was in a bad mood. You would think a Nobody couldn't get angry. But boy, some of Terra's heart *must* still exist inside the old coot's body because as soon as he found out Xion not only flew the coop, but Ryuko's sister took down Axel before the guy could bring her back, he'd changed. Not much. Well, a little. And seated on the throne far above the ground, just below Xemnas's and above Saix's, Xigbar grumbled, "It was hard following the poppet because... well... anyway, Xion met up with the imposter - Riku or something. Sora's friend."

"I see..."

"Gotta admit, never expected Ansem to work alongside that blonde psychopath," Xigbar grimaced, "He must've *really* wanted us dead. Can't say I blame him for trying."

"The heart is nothing more than a burden. Even the most intelligent minds can be reduced to animals under its influence," voicing an opinion he didn't necessary believe himself, Saix stared downwards, amber eyes piercing the platform below them, "But that does not make our former teacher any less of a threat. He's already demonstrated the willingness to ally himself with inhuman monsters to achieve something as ludicrous as revenge. However, it's Riku I'm far more concerned about."

"That brat?"

Scoffing loud enough to draw unwanted attention, Xigbar's eye narrowed. A testament to his annoyance, "As if! The Keyblade's already decided his heart wasn't good enough. Sora's more of a threat than Riku."

"I don't know whether you're being dense or ignorant," Saïx countered Xigbar's scoff while brushing aside the one-eyed Nobody's indignation, "Riku's association with Ryuko can't be overlooked. If Xion has learned the truth, she most likely will desire meeting Ryuko. But Ryuko alone won't be an issue. It is her friends... her allies... her teachers... that pose individually significant threats. We cannot afford for Xion to spill our darkest secrets."

"You know, this would be so much easier if she wasn't stuffed with those annoying threads," he'd argued against the program, said it was foolish and dangerous and several particular words unable to be repeated in pleasant company. Why the hell work with Life Fibers? But Vexen was stubborn, determined to prove something of himself. And now? Now the stupid bastard was nowhere, all thanks to pissing off something better left forgotten. Half of his face twitching, Xigbar tossed his hands overhead, "I *knew* the poppet would eventually chew through her leash. Now it's only a matter of -"

"Xion has disappeared - that is a fact."

Xemnas didn't raise his voice.

He did not need to.

The mere absence of emotion was enough to render Xigbar's argument invalid.

"Which begets the question," expressing his disappointment, Xemnas turned his gaze downwards, "When, exactly, did she first begin formulating thoughts of leaving us?"

"I'm not sure," Saïx answered honestly, "But if I had to choose a timeline, it was most likely when Nui Harime introduced herself on

Halloween Town during Xion and Roxas's mission to investigate the strange Heartless incursion befalling the world."

"I hold a different belief," the Superior of the Organization shook his head, "I believe that *wasn't* Xion's first encounter with Nui Harime, but their second or perhaps third."

"What?"

"Huh?"

Saix and Xigbar's befuddled reactions were enough to elicit what could only be called a smirk from their Superior as Xemnas continued, "After reviewing the tragic events which befell our comrades at Castle Oblivion, I've come to believe Nui Harime introduced herself to Xion some time before that mission. Weeks or perhaps months. It was *that* original encounter which began the steady and unrelenting process of unraveling Vexen's exceptional work."

"Great," lamenting the unfortunate turn of events in the only way he could - by rolling his eye and sighing - Xigbar grumbled, "So, since you've pieced everything together, does this mean you know what that monster's planning? Or are we just stumbling in the dark?"

"Is it not obvious?"

Xigbar snapped towards Saix, "Huh?"

"If she wished to destroy Xion, it would have been easy. The skills she displayed were more than sufficient to defeat Roxas and Xion long before I or Axel arrived," the small emptiness inside Saix's chest remained still as he remembered Roxas and Xion's injuries. Nothing too severe. Cuts. Bruises. But Axel's reaction to their injuries - running towards Nui Harime like a crazed maniac - arose something feral. A sense of betrayal he couldn't understand, "Her objective is not Xion's destruction, but to turn her from our puppet into hers. A

weapon to be unleashed against us. Why do you think Lord Xemnas ordered Axel to retrieve Vexen's weapon from Castle Oblivion?"

"A weapon?"

The sharpshooter squinted, caught between a frown and resembling someone who ate a lemon. A weapon? Vexen created a weapon against Life Fibers? Something like that should've probably surprised him, but the more he thought about it, the more it didn't. Still, he needed to put on a brave face. And so, acting as if he'd been caught out of the loop, which wasn't that far off, he voiced his concerns at the only person who could answer them - the old coot's vessel, "This is the first time I've heard of this. When were you gonna tell me about it?"

"When it became necessary to do so," Xigbar's supposed Superior declared in a breathless chuckle, "Our dear friend outdid himself. Not only did Vexen manifest Ryuko's powers and abilities into a perfect replica, he also provided the means of destroying Xion if she ever proved too difficult to control."

Focusing on those words, Saix's expression shifted at the underlying meaning, "Perhaps Project Ryuko Replica was always destined for failure. Even if Vexen managed to suppress her memories, Xion is - and always will be - Ryuko Matoi. Life Fibers are too unstable and dangerous to control."

"Now comes the difficult part - what to do with the poppet."

Xigbar snorted, a derisive and infuriated expression of the same person - albeit in a different body - disrupting everything he'd spent centuries putting together, "Don't really have a preference. Just want to know the plan because if Xion's anything like Ryuko, taking her down ain't going to be easy."

"True."

"For the time being, we shall simply endeavor to find Xion," Xemnas's voice rose an octave, barely noticeable in the grandiose emptiness around them, "It's a shame. Her contribution towards creating our very own Kingdom Hearts has been most beneficial. Thousands of hearts. Tens of thousands. But I am no fool. Although I would enjoy once more accepting Xion into our fold, we cannot. For it's more likely than not she's already being observed."

Saïx's eyebrow, "By *her*?"

"It is as you've said - a creature such as her could have easily destroyed Xion before you or Axel arrived," the Superior of all Nobodies leaned backwards on his throne, "Who is to say she's not watching Xion, perhaps in an attempt to lure one of us into the open?"

The luna diviner opened his mouth before refusing to speak what was on his mind.

"This weapon. Vexen's super-secret weapon," drawling out the question while ignoring his itching scars, Xigbar shifted gears towards something less depressing, "Does it work?"

Saïx sighed, "We don't know."

The cold sniper double-took at the casual admittance, "What the hell do you mean you don't know?"

"I *mean*," Saïx reiterated, "Vexen did not have time to test it."

"Great," hand subtly clenching, Xigbar grumbled with honesty he normally reserved for things he didn't care about, "Ain't that perfect."

"It would truly be wasteful destroying Xion," Xemnas spoke and, not for the first time since sitting down, Xigbar and Saïx listened, "However, we already have a Keyblade. Saïx, you will tell Axel what he must do if Xion becomes a liability. Is that understood?"

For some reason, Saïx knew he shouldn't have readily agreed.

But breathing steadily, thoughts calm and mind clear, he closed his eyes and nodded, "Of course."

Last edited: Oct 24, 2020

Chapter 22.6 [Day 299]

"So, what do you want out of life?"

It bothers me. I can't remember when the human sat down next to me.

There I was, minding my own business, waiting to see what Riku and that pale imitation were up to, when he appeared out of nowhere.

On second thought - it hadn't been 'out of nowhere.' Even in the greater world, there were rules. Some more bendable than others.

A neat little addendum that sorcerers like Merlin figured out centuries ago.

This man... well, he sounded like a man... walked not out of the darkness, but the space between realities.

How did I know that? Even after spending a lot of time thinking about it, I'm not quite sure.

What did I want?

There was no reason to think about the question. It was stupid. Idiotic. The sort of question Ryuko read in the newspapers.

But no matter how much I tried ignoring it, it refused to leave my head. It kept coming back and back and back.

What do I want?

I had an answer for him. It was on the tip of my tongue. The perfect response to get him out of my hair.

I want to see everything. Explore to my heart's content. I want to learn everything there is to know about synthesis.

Stupid nonsense most humans would believe until they grew bored and moved on.

But from his expression, which I could see despite the hood covering his face in shadows, the man didn't believe me.

And then had the nerve to rub it in my face.

"Oh, sure, that's the standard answer. I want to see everything! I want to live life to the fullest! Discover the deepest mysteries of the universe! But it is the truth?"

I wanted to kill him.

I really did.

Unfortunately, several failed attempts later, I realized he was one of the few humans I couldn't slaughter.

After several tries at teaching him a lesson, I gave up. For the moment. Not forever, of course. I'd never let someone that rude walk away.

He was going to die. He had to die. It would have been embarrassing otherwise, especially after he insulted me.

Another fact he ever-so-helpfully rubbed in my face.

But as I was pondering what to do with him, he snuck out of the hole in the building, dusted himself off and changed the subject.

"So... you know, I've been wondering. And it might be a little personal. But what's the deal between you and Ryuko?"

I remember that question as if it were only yesterday. A strange question that refuses to go away.

And that seriously frustrated me. Because his tone... his mockery... his arrogance... felt familiar. Way too familiar.

As if we'd met before, perhaps in a dream. That was when it occurred to me. I had met this man.

Or perhaps it was more accurate to suggest Ryuko met him. Not here. Not now. But inside her heart.

This was the man from her dreams. An arrogant, conceited and egotistical human that knew way too much.

"That's none of your business."

I buried those feelings until the chance to act showed itself. Which might have taken minutes. Or hours. Or days.

Because as much as I searched and searched and searched, I couldn't see an opening. And that only worsened my mood.

In the meantime, I smiled. I wasn't happy. Nope. I was angry. Really, really, really angry. It was one thing to talk about family with Ryuko.

But a total stranger? And one who went out of his way to constantly barge into Ryuko's heart without knocking? Not in a million years.

"But if you really want answers, how about you tell me your name?"

I didn't expect him to answer.

I'd met humans like him before. Pigs in human clothing who acted mysterious and refused to give straight answers.

Oh, I can't tell you. Oh, my name isn't important. Or my favorite, what is a name but a means to an end.

I can't remember exactly where I heard the last one, but even after ten years and sleeping inside Ryuko, it stuck with me.

"Cutting right to the chase, huh? Well, if you insist. I suppose I can tell you my name. It's - "

I remember staring at the man, not so much out of confusion but disappointment.

That was his name? Seriously?

At the time, I wanted to mock him. Such a stupid name. If he wanted to break the ice, why not make up a name?

"Gosh, that's boring!"

Oh, the light in his eyes faded at that. It was the best moment of the conversation.

"Maybe, but it's my name. And it's quite special. To me, anyway. In the grand scheme of things, it doesn't really matter. Now, about Ryuko..."

I'd almost forgot he wanted to know about Ryuko. There was nothing stopping me from leaving except, well, the hatred inside my heart.

I suppose that was why I stayed instead of walking away and finding out what Riku was doing inside the old coot's manor.

"Nothing much, really. Just some old family business left unsettled. And I'd appreciate you leaving it at that."

Once upon a time, I would have believed Ryuko spent every waking moment hating me... despising me... wanting me dead more than anything.

All of those things were still true. To an extent. But Ryuko had other things on her heart. Things she believed more important than family.

Which was a little... disappointing.

It's hard to explain, even to myself. And I won't bother trying. But thanks to our hearts synchronizing, part of Ryuko's heart rests inside my chest.

Of course, nothing's changed.

I don't feel guilty for anything I did. Nope. Not in the slightest. If I could have a do-over, I'd stroll into that house and kill Ryuko's dad again.

"Huh, sounds like one dysfunctional family. Err, no offense."

The fear never quite reached his voice. It was all pretend. Fake. A means of assuaging my suspicions, but only made me angrier.

Love and hate were two sides of the same coin. The more someone hated her, the more they loved her. Everyone thought that was something deep.

But it was really simple. Love and hatred were basically the same emotion, only twisted and turned about itself. Intensity. That was the meaning.

"None taken! But gosh, next time you open your mouth, think really hard about what you're gonna say. Or I'll sew it shut!"

To his credit, he actually backed down.

"Sorry, it's been a while since I've had an actual conversation. You travel the world for years and suddenly your social skills fade into the darkness!"

I snorted, because that was the only reasonable response.

"That's no excuse."

The human actually agreed - in his own stupid way.

"True, anyway, I want to ask you something. A favor. Nothing you don't already want to do."

I probably should have said no. Who was he, a human, to ask me to do anything? I go wherever I want to go, whenever I want to go, and

nobody can stop me.

Well, almost nobody. Ryuko probably could. And her master. And some annoying magic users. Now that I think about it, the phrase lost some of its meaning.

"Oh? And that is?"

I actually think he found me agreeing to listen quite surprising, if his expression meant anything.

"The replica you're watching. Xion. For everything to work, she needs to fade away on a specific date."

The request took me completely off-guard. In more ways than one. I remember turning to him for the first time since he stupidly decided to sit down next to me.

He had to be joking. It was one of those stupid jokes Ryuko found hilarious and thanks to our connected hearts, so did I, no matter how much I didn't want to.

But the human wasn't kidding. He honestly and truly wanted me to kill Xion that pathetic imitation of something far more special.

"... you're kidding."

A little bit of Ryuko bled into my voice.

"Nope. Honest. I totally agree that she needs to go away. Just... well... you're busy and all, but can you make sure to do it fifty-nine days from now? It'll be worth it!"

I still wanted to kill him.

"Well, you sound super invested in my plans. Tell you what - leave and I'll take your advice into consideration."

I closed my eyes, smiling in a way that conveyed the hatred and disgust bubbling inside my heart.

And when I opened my eyes, the human had vanished as quickly and effortlessly as he appeared, which pissed me off even further.

I would kill him.

No matter how long it took, I was going to kill him.

Chapter 22.7 [Day 303]

[img: <https://i.imgur.com/kmyhddK.png>]

As the last heart twirled away into the darkness, summoned across time and space to the artificial Kingdom Hearts floating above the castle, Xigbar yawned. Some worlds were simply boring. And others annoying. Then there was the third kind, worlds where nothing made sense. This Wonderland pretty much had the third category to itself. Talking flowers, a deck of playing cards and an insane cheshire cat that uttered riddles far too close for comfort. Of course, thanks to Ryuko's sister taking down the Jabberwock and mounting its corpse on display in Lindblum, that was one less problem to deal with.

"Aaaand that's quota."

The number one advantage about lacking a heart and no longer wielding a Keyblade?

Heartless tended to ignore you.

Which meant he could sit back and relax while Roxas did all the work, "Alright, kiddo, that's enough for today."

"Huh?" out of breath and arms tired from swinging the Keyblade, Roxas finished another Heartless before craning his head towards Xigbar, who was lazily lounging on the table in the middle of the room, "But there's more Heartless."

"Lord Xemnas said to destroy five hundred Heartless, which is five less than you've taken out," yawning again, Xigbar rubbed his neck, "Time to head back to the castle."

"But what about the queen?"

"What *about* her?" Xigbar mockingly asked, "Don't tell me you still want to help? After she sentenced you to death, you actually want to help her?"

Half embarrassed and half annoyed, Roxas raised his voice, "Yeah, and what's wrong with helping people?"

"Alright," somber resignation, plus more than a hint of irritation, clung to Xigbar as he worked the kinks out of his shoulders. Ten months and Roxas still acting like one of those heroes who believed the world existed in blacks and white, "Time for another of good ol' Xigbar's life lessons - not everyone wants to be helped. Some people simply want to burn the world down for fun."

"But why?"

"Asking the wrong person for answers," exhaling through lips scarred by experience, Xigbar rolled his eye, "I don't make a habit out of talking with everyone on the street."

"Are you ~sure~ about that?"

BANG!!!

Xigbar squeezed the trigger but a single time.

Yet a crescendo of arrows, tinted purple in the daylight and influenced by nothingness, each following their own trajectory, shot towards the *only* being who could sneak up like that.

"Is that how you introduce yourself to a fine, upstanding young woman?"

Holes pockmarked the brickwork and wallpaper behind her. Acrid smoke wafted into her nose. It *smelled* terrible. Perched on the stove, having dodged the Nobody's attack with basic ease, Nui Harime twiddled the only projectile that had gotten close between her manicured fingers, "Because that's really rude."

"An upstanding woman, huh?"

Xigbar scoffed at the monster's idea of a joke, "Tell ya what? You find me someone like that and maybe I'll apologize. Sound fair?"

"Oh, aren't you sarcastic!" the former Grand Couturier didn't squeeze her fingers, for that would imply it required effort. But with a sly grin promising endless suffering, she shattered the Nobody's projectile back to nothingness, "But sorry love, you know better than to think a few magical arrows is enough to hurt me," prefacing the brutal honesty by clapping her hands, wiping away dust as a bonus, her smile turned into a frown when one of the arrows that missed - she was *certain* it missed - teleported back to reality, blowing a gaping hole through her head from the back to front.

He knew it wasn't permanent. He knew she'd bounce back in moments. But god damn did it feel *great* to wipe that insufferable smirk off her face. Still, he wasn't an idiot. Having had his moment, Xigbar focused on step two of his plan - grabbing Roxas and fleeing with his tail between his legs, "Well, time to get going!"

"Not bad."

On the opposite side of the table, smiling despite the hole in her head, Nui Harime's cute clone grumbled. Boy, some people sure were trigger happy. And after she went through the effort of creating a doppelgänger. Maybe it couldn't fight as well as herself use her Keyblade. But it was still her, right down to the heart beating inside her chest. Nevertheless, despite a hole where her left eye used to be - an annoying irony that *wasn't* lost on the former Grand Couturier - Nui reached up and wiggled a finger through the ragged Life Fibers writhing around the wound, "A solid five out of ten. It looks like my doppelganger isn't as strong as I thought if ~your~ attacks damaged it."

Roxas did his best *not* to stare at the unsettling darkness within Nui Harime, "Wait - you're not... here?"

"Of course not!"

BANG!!!

Despite missing an eye and standing nearly point-blank away from the self-proclaimed freeshooter, the false puppet bearing the Grand Couturier's besmirched visage avoided several arrows. She leaned out of the way, dodging the projectiles without moving from her spot. Well, at least she tried. Because compared to her true self, which was seated at a restaurant within New Orleans, poking at a half-finished plate of food, her doppelgänger was pretty much helpless. It might have avoided the first salvo. But the second? Third? Fourth? It could only stand around and do nothing as arrow after arrow reduced it to nothing more than shredded Life Fibers fading away into darkness.

"What a pain in my - "

Xigbar stopped before finished the curse. Instead of saying something in front of Roxas he might eventually regret, he stepped forward and ground his heel against one of few pieces of glowing nonsense that haven't yet dissipated, "How did she find us?"

"How ~didn't~ I find you?"

Behind them, another Nui Harime sat on the windowsill, perfect and untarnished despite having met her end moments ago, "You know, for an organization hellbent on keeping things hush-hush, you're not difficult to find."

Roxas didn't know who said it - him or Xigbar. But glancing at what remained of the previous Nui, eyes widen and jaw slackening, he asked the next question, "But how?"

"Don't make me repeat myself," manicured fingers strumming against her cheek, Nui leaned forward, smiling at Roxas in the same manner a shark grinned while approaching its next unfortunate meal, "I told you I wasn't here. This is nothing more than one of my

adorable doppelgängers. As you know, they're not strong. But they're ~ useful~ for talking to someone without leaving the comfort of home. I mean - really! Why on ~earth~ would I waste my precious time on a couple of nobodies?"

With a not-so-subtle twist of his wrist and clenching his fingers, Xigbar snapped his arrowguns into a sniper rifle.

"Great," the freeshooter's lament could be heard halfway across Wonderland, "Almost afraid to ask, but why are you here?"

"It's funny you should ask," one leg crossed over the other, pink and white hooded jacket prominent in the sunlight and matching sneakers bouncing alongside her restless legs, Nui's voice suggested she was anything but amused, "To be honest, I was hoping your little science project would have beaten me here, but it seems that's expecting too much of something so pathetic."

"Xion..."

Her name slipped from Roxas's tongue before he caught himself. And he grew angry. Everything that happened. It was all Nui Harime's fault. If she hadn't appeared, Xion would never have betrayed the organization. His voice cracking, Roxas stepped forward, Keyblade gripped tightly between his fingers, as if it would help against the woman, "What have you done to her? Where is she!?"

"What have ~I~ done to her, you ask?" a plucked eyebrow, blonde as the rest of her hair, arched upwards as Nui tittered alongside a mischievous grin. Silhouetted against the sunlight streaming through the window, she repeated Roxas's childish question. Not merely through her clone, but with her own lips, quirked halfway across the realm of light, "Oh, you don't need to worry. I haven't done ~anything~ to that pale imitation.

"Stop calling Xion that!"

Roxas didn't know why he screamed, but everything Nui said utterly enraged him, "She's not an object or an imitation! She's a real person! With emotions and feelings and everything!"

"Maybe, maybe not, it's not really important," it was hard for either Nobody to tell from so far away, but the Grand Couturier's expression somewhat tightened. Her smile, permanently present, faded into a glower. One that lasted no more than a second, yet long enough to draw Xigbar's undivided attention when she uncrossed her legs and leaned forward, dulled eyes staring through the young Keyblade wielder at something lurking beneath the physical, "Like I told you so many times - if you want me to stop calling it that, you gotta beat the snot out of me. And we both know that's never going to happen."

"Why you - " Roxas seethed only for Xigbar, of all people, to step forward and stop him before he could finish.

"Huh, far be it for me to interrupt someone's speech, but if you're going to troll Roxas, try not to be so predictable," his finger resting against the trigger, Xigbar refrained from stating his own reaction to the monster. Including, and not limited to, how much he wanted to kick her smug halfway to the realm of darkness. Which was why he glanced over his shoulder at Roxas, "That goes double for you! Are you stupid? You know better than to listen to anything she says!"

"I - " the amnesiac Nobody struggled to answer.

"Way to spoil my fun," it was hard to tell, given the distance between them, but the Grand Couturier's expression tightened, drawing Xigbar's undivided attention when she uncrossed her legs and leaned forward, "But let me ask you something - Keyblade wielder to Keyblade wielder - do you *honestly* think I'm the only person looking for your friend?"

Roxas's heart skipped several beats, "What?"

"It's true," and it was, from several perspectives. She wasn't the only person interested in Xion. And whether these nobodies liked it or not, she wasn't someone who lied just for fun and laughter, "That's why I had my little clone track you down. I was ~hoping~ your little friend would have come crawling back by now. But it seems she needs a little more incentive."

"Incentive?"

Xigbar shouldered one of his arrowguns while keeping the other one aimed at the monster's clone, "That's a fancy way of saying you can't find Xion, isn't it?"

"Bingo," an amused smile graced Nui's face, "You know, the heart sure is curious. Sometimes I don't understand it myself."

Xigbar's eyebrow arched at that. He did *not* like where she was going with this, "Is that right?"

"Definitely," from her perch halfway across the universe, Nui had her puppet stand upon its own feet, "Everything's connected. All hearts and memories. The past and the future are but one and the same. If you look hard enough, you can follow one heart to another. And then another. And then another. In the end, it's one endless chain of hearts, all leading right back to where it all began. Oh, but what am I saying?" feigning embarrassment, she covered her mouth with her hand and pretended to gasp, "You're Nobodies. Apart from being an outright bore, you don't have hearts. So everything I'm saying means absolutely nothing to pathetic creatures like - "

BANG! BANG!

"Deep Freeze!"

Roxas and Xigbar launched their respective attacks at the former Grand Couturier, leaving her full of holes and froze mid-rant, a wide smile on her face.

"Did we get her?"

As the monster's frozen corpse shattered, Xigbar ignored Roxas's question, choosing instead to sweep his arm backwards, an arrowgun aimed right between another clone's eyes, "You're nothing like the real deal, are you?"

"Nope, my cute little dopplegangers have no powers at all. Not like they used to have," Nui's *second* duplicate stepped backwards, effortlessly leaping onto the chair, chin resting on her hand and eyes focused squarely on Roxas. Right before leaning backwards, dodging several arrows and continued as if nothing happened, "But as much as I hate it, your pathetic friend *does* have a heart. A heart copied from a very special one. A heart better than all the rest. But hearts are truly fickle. Because... oh... let's say something really, super-duper bad were to happen to someone it considered its best friend in the world. What do you think will happen?"

"I'm not afraid of you."

The sheer *anger* in Roxas's voice legitimately took Nui by surprise, "You're not?"

"It's like you said - you're not really here," Roxas didn't know when his grip tightened to the point his knuckles hurt, but swinging his Keyblade towards the woman who'd gone out of her way to make Xion's life miserable, he declared, "Besides, why should I be afraid of you? I've gotten stronger. Way stronger!"

"You ~have~!?"

The sheer intrigue clinging to Nui's heart was enough to smolder Roxas's fury, "That's perfect!"

BOOM! BOOM! CRASH!

Out of the darkness, a massive Heartless resembling a winged serpent crashed to the floor near the table, shaking the bizarre room

and nearly knocking Roxas over.

"Have fun, Roxas!" dissolving into crimson threads as the Jabberwock's Heartless grabbed the table, Nui's smile was the last thing that remained, "Try not to die!"

"GRRAAAAUUUU!!!!!"

As the powerful shadow of Wonderland's formerly unbeatable monster - until meeting Satsuki Kiryuin, that was - loomed over them, Xigbar grumbled, "I really hate that woman."

Last edited: Nov 26, 2020